INDEX TO THE

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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Printed indexes to Hansard

This index is produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary Information Management Services (PIMS). It contains references to all material in the bound volume of Hansard.

- At the end of the session a sessional index is produced containing references to material in the bound volumes for the whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Volume indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Petitions', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various PIMS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, Identity and Passport Service, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Union and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Union' and the named individual institutions. Material about what the Union and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Cross references

- *See* references indicate that all the material has been entered under another heading.
- *See also* references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.

REFERENCES

- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates and petitions, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings, written statements, written questions and ministerial corrections:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'ws' indicate written statements.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
  - References ending in 'p' indicate written petitions.
  - References ending in 'mc' indicate ministerial corrections. (Where a volume number is given, the correction appears in a later volume).
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting, is a written statement or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Chamber Debates* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Westminster Hall Debates* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings);
  - *Written Statements* (consisting of ministerial statements issued in writing); and
  - *Questions* (which includes all written, oral and urgent questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R = First reading
- 2R = Second reading
- Com = Committee stage
- Rep = Report stage
- 3R = Third reading
- res = resolution
- amendt(s) = amendment(s)
- * = matter taken formally without debate or division
- (HL) = Bill starting in House of Lords
- (SP) = Bill in Scottish Parliament.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

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FIFTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2009–2010

COMPRISING PERIOD
7 December 2009 – 16 December 2009

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 11 MAY 2005]

FIFTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 502**

SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 2009-2010

House of Commons

Monday 7 December 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Youth Unemployment

1. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the causes of the change in the level of youth unemployment in the last 12 months. [304061]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Yvette Cooper): Young people have been particularly heavily affected by the impact of the global financial crisis and the recession. Many employers have chosen to delay new recruitment, which is why the £5 billion investment that we have put in place to help the unemployed includes a £1 billion future jobs fund as well as extra training and support for young people across the country.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. She will be aware that many people who are not graduates also need help and support in finding employment. What measures are the Government taking to ensure that those without degrees are given as much help and support as those who have left university?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point because we need to help young people, whatever their circumstances or their level of qualifications, to be able to get into work as rapidly as possible. Currently, more than half of young people are managing to leave the claimant count new jobseeker's allowance within three months, so a lot of people are getting help. As well as support for graduates, particularly through internships, we are providing additional help for young people through additional training places, the September guarantee, and the young person's guarantee that no young person should become long-term unemployed. The future jobs fund is also providing youth jobs in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I hope that his party will change its policy and support it, as it is making a difference to young people.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State place in the Library information on the breakdown by educational qualification of those who are young and unemployed? That would show just how important the Government's education reforms are in supporting a safe move from school into work.

Yvette Cooper: I am certainly happy to make sure that that information is available. My right hon. Friend is right that those with lower qualifications and skills are at higher risk not just of unemployment generally but of becoming long-term unemployed. That is why it is important not only to raise the education-leaving age so that more young people stay on in education, but to provide the guarantee that young people do not end up stuck on the dole for the long term. The £5 billion investment to support that is also important.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): In the last Department for Work and Pensions questions on 19 October, as reported in *Hansard* at column 620, I effectively asked the Government to adopt our proposal

to give the young unemployed specialist help through welfare-to-work providers after six months. The Secretary of State dismissed this, but yesterday in *The Sunday Telegraph*, it was reported that the Government were going to change the young person's guarantee so that in future it will kick in at six months. That is not enough, but will the Secretary of State now admit that she got it wrong and we got it right?

Yvette Cooper: Let us be clear of the consequence of the programme we have already put in place. Youth unemployment figures for the right hon. Lady's constituency show 2,200 young people on the dole at the moment compared with 4,300 in December 1992—half the level it was in the early 1990s. I would also point out that the investment we have put in place not only provides support at six months but provides it from day one of unemployment—from the very beginning when young people lose their job and need to find work. We are investing to deliver the young person's guarantee with £5 billion of additional investment. Her party opposes that and she also opposes the young person's guarantee that we want to bring forward. She has opposed it because she cannot support the investment to guarantee jobs and training for young people.

Mrs. May: The Secretary of State is always keen to contrast the performance of the last Conservative Government and this Labour Government with selective figures, so I will give her a contrast. In the last five years of the last Conservative Government, youth unemployment fell by 251,000. In the five years of this Labour Government before the recession began, youth unemployment rose by 129,000. We will give earlier help through welfare-to-work providers and create hundreds of thousands of new apprenticeships, training places, places at further education colleges and work pairings. Is not the clear contrast the one between a Conservative party that has policies to help young people and a Labour Government who have let them down?

Yvette Cooper: What utter and complete nonsense! The right hon. Lady will not guarantee young people a job or training or real-work opportunities for young people right now, and she will not fund the additional investment of £5 billion to help young people right now. As long as Conservative Members oppose the £5 billion investment, they cannot back our young person's guarantee and the extra help. I have to say to her again that the 18 to 24-year-olds claimant count is 462,000 right now; in the early '90s it was 784,000; in the mid-80s it was 980,000. This investment helps young people through the recession rather than abandoning them like the Conservatives did time and again in previous recessions and want to do again now because they want to cut the investment and support that is aimed at giving those young people a chance.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): May I bring to the attention of my right hon. Friend the report from my constituency, "Northampton Young People and the Recession"? Will she say how she is going to meet one of the challenges mentioned in it—providing targeted help for young people who have quite complex needs and making sure that they get support with social issues as well as training to get them back into the job market as quickly as possible?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. People, especially those with complex needs, need individual support to deal with particular circumstances. She will know that the future jobs fund is providing real job opportunities for young people. The Conservatives have said that they would abolish it, but I know that it is already making a difference in her part of the world. We want to expand on that to provide additional help for, in particular, those with the greatest needs, who might otherwise be at the greatest risk of long-term unemployment.

Winter Fuel Payments

2. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support older people during the winter months. [304062]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Yvette Cooper): This winter, older people will again receive the higher levels of winter fuel payment: £250, and £400 for the over-80s. We are also maintaining the cold weather payment at last year's higher rate this winter.

Shona McIsaac: Given that, of all the initiatives introduced by the Government, the winter fuel payment is probably the most universally popular with the over-60s, what does my right hon. Friend think of Members who have described that assistance as a gimmick and believe that it should be abolished?

Yvette Cooper: There are pensioners across the country who certainly do not regard extra cash in their pockets at the time when they need it most as a gimmick. They regard it as a lifeline that helps them to pay their fuel bills in the winter. In 1997-98, about £60 million a year was spent on helping pensioners with fuel bills; now we spend about £2.7 billion a year. I think that that represents a justifiable increase in investment in helping people to get through the winter months.

Workplace Pension Saving

3. **Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South) (Con): What steps she plans to take to encourage uptake of workplace pension saving. [304064]

The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society (Angela Eagle): Our reforms to workplace pension saving, including automatic enrolment and the introduction of the personal accounts scheme, will result in between 5 million and 9 million people newly saving, or saving more, for their retirement.

Richard Ottaway: The Minister will be well aware of Conservative criticism of the Government's appalling record on pensions and the savings culture, but she may not be aware of the comments of the chief executive of the National Association of Pension Funds, who said the other day:

"The Government can no longer sit on its hands. It must take bold and positive action to help support employer-sponsored pensions."

Even at this late hour, can the Minister get a grip on the issue, do something about it, and reverse the culture towards pensions that has prevailed in this country for far too long?

Angela Eagle: The Government are determined to support the provision of good private sector schemes. That is why we are in the middle of putting into effect the Turner commission's proposals, which will ensure that between 5 million and 9 million people who do not currently have an opportunity to save begin to do so. We know of the hon. Gentleman's views on the stresses on defined benefit final salary schemes so perhaps he will explain why the Conservatives want to reduce pension saving in the public sector.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): What evidence have the Government that tax relief on pension contributions, particularly for higher-rate taxpayers, has any effect on savings for pensions? If the Government have such evidence, will they please send it to me?

Angela Eagle: I have seen no such evidence, although I have heard plenty of assertions since my right hon. Friend the Chancellor decided to reduce the tax relief available to those who earn more than £150,000 a year. As for the distribution of tax relief accorded to pensions savings, I do not know whether my hon. Friend is aware that 230,000 of the best-off people in the country currently receive £6.1 billion, or 25 per cent. of all that tax relief.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): The Minister will know that the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority is now reduced to just two potential bidders to provide the massive IT system for personal accounts and that it will have personal data on millions of employees who have never been pensioned before. Is she concerned about that and, in particular, would she be concerned if one or both of those bidders held those sensitive data offshore?

Angela Eagle: I would certainly not be concerned about the fact that the competitive dialogue being led by the authority has now reduced the number of potential bidders from four to two. One would expect that as part of a dialogue. Clearly we must be careful about the way in which personal data are held, and it is certainly true that the security of personal data is very important in this context. I assure the hon. Gentleman that those concerns are being taken into account adequately in continuing discussions between the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority and the potential bidders who are still left in the competition.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Workplace pensions are extremely important for employers and employees, but will the Minister also have discussions with the trade unions to encourage them to play a positive role in encouraging such schemes?

Angela Eagle: I regularly see stakeholders on all sides of the pensions issue, including trade unions, as well as suppliers and stakeholders in the pensions industry itself. The trade unions have long played an important role, such as by providing trustees to ensure that pension funds are properly and adequately looked after and administered. I intend, of course, to continue seeing representatives of all sides of the pensions industry. It is important that employees as well as employers have the confidence that the pensions they are putting aside are being properly administered. That is why it is also important that, for the first time ever, we have the Pension Protection Fund, which ensures that, in the event of private sector insolvency, there are protections for those who have paid into, and invested in, private pension funds.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne) (Con): But can the Minister confirm that 100,000 pension schemes have been wound up since 1997 and that the number of active members has halved from 5.1 million in 1995 to 2.6 million according to the latest Office for National Statistics figures published very recently? Is it any wonder that a survey conducted by the Minister's own Department showed that 51 per cent. of people do not trust the Government to act in their best interests on pensions?

Angela Eagle: It is important to understand that the decline in final salary or defined benefit schemes, which the hon. Gentleman refers to, has been going on since the 1960s, when I was at school, so it was rather a long time ago. There is no magic bullet in preserving defined benefit schemes. Perhaps he will also acknowledge his party's role in the creation of personal pensions and the mis-selling scandals of the 1980s, which also destroyed confidence in pension-saving schemes.

Disability Benefits

4. **Mr. Douglas Carswell** (Harwich) (Con): What plans the Government have for the future of disability living allowance and other disability benefits. [304065]

11. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West) (Con): What plans the Government have for the future of disability living allowance and other disability benefits. [304072]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Jonathan Shaw): The "Shaping the future of care together" Green Paper set out our vision for a new national care service. There may be a case for bringing together some disability benefits and the adult social care system into a single system, as a better way of providing support to older and disabled people. The Department keeps all our benefits under review.

Mr. Carswell: Many folk in Clacton who have disabilities and whose need is genuine have contacted me to say they are very concerned that they could lose their allowances. Can the Minister guarantee that the deficit will not be fixed on the back of vulnerable people in Clacton who genuinely need these allowances?

Jonathan Shaw: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest in disability benefits. We are, of course, concerned about pensioner disability benefits—both attendance allowance and disability living allowance. As the hon. Gentleman will know, about 1.7 million extra people are going to need social care by 2026, so we do need a new system, but I can assure him that those people who are receiving the affected benefits at the time of reform of the care service nationally will continue to receive the same level of cash support.

Mr. Amess: I represent the most centenarians in the country, and a huge number of senior citizens in my constituency are greatly concerned about any changes to their allowances. Will the Minister put their minds at rest by saying that the changes to, or even abolition of,

the attendance allowance, as referred to in the Green Paper, will not mean that 2.5 million pensioners will be £3,500 a year worse off?

Jonathan Shaw: I have given an assurance about the arrangements for existing claimants if we introduce a national care service. Many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents are currently living to 100, and he will be aware that that number will quadruple in 20 years' time—and I hope he is among them, and that you are, too, Mr. Speaker. The Wanless report identified that, because of the ageing population profile in this country, we will need an additional £6 billion, so we do need a new system. I have assured the House that existing claimants will continue to receive the same cash levels as before, but I think that everyone recognises that we need a new system, and that is why we are determined to bring forward this debate.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): The Government have a good record as far as disabled people are concerned, but does my hon. Friend recognise the genuine anxiety among many disabled people about the Green Paper? It is necessary to reassure them that no one who is genuinely disabled will lose out as a result.

Jonathan Shaw: My hon. Friend will have heard the scaremongering from certain quarters. I think that we all accept that, with the ageing population, we need a system that is fit for purpose. With increasing age comes increasing cost, and there is a demand for more quality, too. Grappling with these competing demands necessitates that we should come up with a new system. If we do not, the current system will buckle and fail. I hope that my hon. Friend will take the assurance from me that existing claimants will continue to receive the same cash level of support if we introduce a national care service.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): May I draw the Minister's attention to a problem that is affecting some of my constituents who are in receipt of disability and other benefits? If they report any change in circumstance, there seems to be a very long time lag before their new benefit is agreed. In the meantime—and these people are on very low incomes—they are left with no income at all. Will the Minister look into this?

Jonathan Shaw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing to our attention the concerns of her constituents in Milton Keynes. If she provides me with the details of those constituents who have experienced a delay, I shall certainly look into the matter.

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is no good the Minister pretending that this is all Conservative scaremongering, because 34 Labour Members have signed early-day motion 1 and they, along with all the disability organisations, oppose taking away attendance allowance and disability living allowance and folding them into the social care system. The simple question for the Minister is this: the Secretary of State herself, in evidence to the Select Committee, said that older people valued attendance allowance and disability living allowance and the independence and control that they gave them, so how do they benefit if those benefits are taken away and, at best, they are not even given back to them in an individual budget or, at worst, if they lose that independence and control? How do they benefit?

Jonathan Shaw: The hon. Gentleman is approaching this from a one-dimensional perspective. I have set out that we have an ageing population and that there will be additional costs in order for us to deliver on a required new system. It took the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues about four months to read this paper before we got a scaremongering response. I have said to his hon. Friends and other hon. Members that existing claimants will have their cash-related income protected as regards attendance allowance and DLA. We need to put in place a system that is fit for the future. We will have a national care system in the same way that we have a national health service, and that is opposed completely by the Opposition.

Jobseeker's Allowance

5. **Mr. Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What the percentage change has been in the number of jobseeker's allowance claimants in (a) Wellingborough constituency and (b) England between 1997 and the latest period for which figures are available. [304066]

The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Jim Knight): From October 1997 to the end of October 2009, the numbers claiming jobseeker's allowance in England have gone up by 163,277 and in Wellingborough by 1,578. This is a change of 14.1 per cent. and 105.1 per cent. respectively. In the same period, employment has risen by 2,685,200 in England and by 11,700 in Wellingborough.

Mr. Bone: In 1997, Tony Blair said that things could only get better. In Wellingborough, unemployment has more than doubled since 1997. How could Tony Blair have got it so wrong?

Jim Knight: Things have certainly got better for those 11,700 people who, thanks to the policies of this Government, are now in work and who would not have been in work before. Things have got better for the 137 people net who came off jobseeker's allowance last month in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I do not hear him celebrating the fact that the figures are now starting to come down in his constituency. All in all, the management of the economy that we have seen over the past year through this recession is in stark contrast to that when his party was in power, when unemployment was deemed a price worth paying. We have now seen unemployment figures that are 400,000 less than those predicted at the time of the Budget in April.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): In Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, including in Wellingborough, those who have been on jobseeker's allowance for 12 months are referred by the local jobcentre to a private sector organisation, the offices of which I visited last week to discuss its approach. How confident is the Minister that the training and support that those outsourced contracts provide will be appropriate to those who seek to find work in a very difficult market?

Jim Knight: My hon. Friend is right to point out that, however good the providers are, we also need to ensure that we have policies in place to create work for people to move into. Those providers are paid on the basis of results—for those whom they successfully get into work—and that is a strong incentive for them properly to match the support that is needed with the individuals. The biggest threat comes from the policies that have been put forward by the shadow Chancellor, which *The Economist* has said would lead to a doubling of unemployment to 5 million.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): Was not the pledge of Labour in 1997 to get 250,000 under-25s off benefits and into work? Is it not the case that today there are 300,000 more under-25s out of work than there were in 1997, and that that figure has been rising for many years? Was it not higher before the recession took hold than it was in 1997? Is there not a problem of structural youth unemployment today, and do we not need some fresh thinking rather than the failed policies of the Government?

Jim Knight: I am afraid that that is more rubbish from the Conservative party. The pledge on the famous pledge cards in 1997 was about long-term youth unemployment and what would be delivered through the new deal. As the noble Lord Freud said a year ago, that was a huge success. We were able to tackle long-term claimant youth unemployment, which is currently an 18th of what it was in 1997. It has been slashed, thanks to the imaginative ideas of the Government. The problems that we have now are in relation to short-term levels of unemployment.

Youth Unemployment

6. **Mr. Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce unemployment among young people; and if she will make a statement. [304067]

12. **Mr. Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the level of youth unemployment; and if she will make a statement. [304073]

The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Jim Knight): We have launched a number of targeted initiatives to tackle youth unemployment, as hon. Members have been hearing. From next month, the young person's guarantee will ensure that all 18 to 24-year-olds on jobseeker's allowance will be guaranteed either the offer of work, work-focused training or meaningful activity. They will then be required to take up one of those opportunities. The future jobs fund will create 150,000 jobs. About 95,000 jobs have already been approved and some have already started, but the Government cannot prevent youth unemployment on our own. That is why we have launched Backing Young Britain, and I am delighted to report that, as a result, more than 330 employers are already pledging new opportunities for young people.

Mr. Clarke: What measures within the future jobs fund and other initiatives within the Department are focused specifically on disabled young people, the vast majority of whom want to experience the same job opportunities and job satisfaction as has been the experience of their peers?

Jim Knight: My right hon. Friend is well known in the House as a champion for disabled people. The future jobs fund is designed to help all young people and, with my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for disabled people, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), I am looking to secure good access to all future jobs fund opportunities for young disabled people. Among the future jobs fund bids, First Movement in the east midlands will offer creative arts and outreach activities for people with disabilities, and, in Scotland, the Royal National Institute of Blind People has proposed a number of jobs, including positions such as facilities officers, conferences officers and an admin director.

Mr. Hepburn: Programmes such as the young person's guarantee are to be welcomed, and I am sure that they will do a lot of good. However, does my hon. Friend realise—I do not know what was in the press yesterday, but as far as I am concerned this is the case with the rules today—that there are daft rules? There is a 39-week eligibility wait before one can qualify for that scheme, which means that about a third of young unemployed people in the north-east will not qualify at all. Will the Minister look into this issue and scrap the rule to make sure that all young people get their rights from day one?

Jim Knight: Given that my hon. Friend comes from the part of the world that he does, which has been hard hit by the recession, I naturally listen carefully to his encouragements. Of course, we continue to consider the point at which people become eligible for increasing levels of support, according to the risks that they have of becoming long-term unemployed. We will have more to say about that in the next few days.

Mr. Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I am sure that the Minister recognises the anger and frustration of young people and families who find themselves unemployed at this time. Why have the numbers been rising steadily, even before the credit crunch? Does he understand and accept that unemployment when one is young has a long-term, scarring effect, from which people often do not recover?

Jim Knight: We know only too well, from our memories of the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, when the Government of the day thought that unemployment was a price worth paying, about the scarring effect of unemployment, especially on young people. It can damage their self-confidence for the rest of their working lives. That is why we have put such a focus on preventing long-term youth unemployment through the £5 billion investment—opposed by the hon. Gentleman and his party—which has been successful, as I have already said in answers today. That is why, if we consider the international position, we see that our youth unemployment is below the European average and that of countries such as France, Italy and Spain.

Local Housing Allowance

7. **Angela Watkinson** (Upminster) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the rules governing local housing allowance. [304068]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): We are taking forward a review of the first two years of the operation of local housing allowance. In many respects, it is effective, but we will shortly consult on the reform of housing benefit. Our aim is a system that is fair to customers, landlords and the taxpayer.

Angela Watkinson: Does the Under-Secretary agree that more private rented accommodation might become available if tenants could opt to have their LHA paid directly to the landlord? The landlord would thus be guaranteed to receive the rent and tenants would not be at risk of accumulating unmanageable debt.

Helen Goodman: I am afraid that we have no independent evidence to support the hon. Lady's proposition. Indeed, the number of people living in the private rented sector has increased by 200,000 since November 2008.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): The local housing allowance was designed to give people an incentive to shop around; if they could get a rent for below the going rate, they could keep the difference. However, the Under-Secretary knows that the Government plan to scrap that. In those circumstances, why would landlords offer rents below local housing allowance level? Will not they simply put up rents as a result? Is not that a direct transfer from the taxpayer to landlords?

Helen Goodman: At the moment, we are considering the consultation responses to our proposals about the £15 excess. We will respond to that in due course. I am afraid that I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's proposition. We believe that the freedom that we have given tenants enables them to shop around. It also gives them more choice, enables them to manage their benefit payments and open bank accounts, and improves their financial inclusion generally.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): But why do the Government persist in refusing tenants' request to have their local housing allowance paid directly to their landlords? That is what tenants want. There is much evidence to show that money goes straight to loan sharks or drug dealers. The policy also reduces the supply of social homes to local housing allowance tenants. When will the Government give tenants the choice for which they are asking?

Helen Goodman: As I have said, the evidence is unclear. The feedback that we have had from local authorities generally is that most tenants manage their benefit payments and do not get into increasing arrears. Choice is only one aspect of the local housing allowance; responsibility is a key principle. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would accept that principle.

Pensioner Poverty

8. **Malcolm Bruce** (Gordon) (LD): What her most recent estimate is of the number of pensioners living in poverty. [304069]

The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society (Angela Eagle): Through targeted support and additional funding, we have got 900,000 pensioners out of the relative poverty in which they were living in 1997. However, there are still 2 million pensioners in relative poverty, which we define as 60 per cent. or below of median household income.

Malcolm Bruce: Does the Minister acknowledge that a reason for that is the complexity and delay involved in applying for benefits, particularly pension credit, for which the form is 18-pages long and the guidance is 19 pages? Does she not accept that, for many people, that is simply a deterrent, which means that they do not claim benefits? Is that not the Government's intention? If it is not, surely they could find a better way of ensuring that people who are entitled to benefits get them.

Angela Eagle: First things first: I am proud to be part of the first Government ever to end the link between poverty and old age. A report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on 3 December revealed that there has been a historic reversal in the fortunes of pensioners over state pension age, who are now at the lowest risk of being in poverty than any other age group. I do very important work with the Pensions Service in attempting to encourage pension credit recipients to claim, and that service makes 13,000 visits a week to the homes of vulnerable pensioners to take them through the claim form. People can claim for pension credit, housing benefit and council tax benefit in the same phone call, and the hon. Gentleman's own local authority—Aberdeenshire—is one of 203 local authorities working in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions to improve the take-up of pension credit, and we believe that we are succeeding.

Jobseeker's Allowance

9. **Mr. David Jones** (Clwyd, West) (Con): How many jobseeker's allowance claimants there were in (a) the UK, (b) Wales and (c) Clwyd, West constituency on the most recent date for which figures are available. [304070]

The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Jim Knight): In October 2009, there were 1,582,555 jobseeker's allowance claimants in the UK, 78,234 in Wales, and 1,603 in the Clwyd, West parliamentary constituency. Employment levels have risen since 1997 by 121,200 in Wales and 6,700 in Clwyd, West.

Mr. Jones: Almost half of the last quarterly increase in unemployment across the UK was attributable to job losses in Wales, which was particularly hard-hit by the downturn. I know that the Minister's Department works closely with the Welsh Assembly Government in the delivery of their ProAct programme, so can he explain why in the 12 months to October this year, not a penny

was spent under that programme in the county of Conwy, which includes my constituency, where there has been a 50 per cent. increase in unemployment?

Jim Knight: The hon. Gentleman is right that I regularly meet Ministers from the Welsh Assembly Government. Over the summer, we were pleased that Wales appeared to buck the trend and be moving in a positive direction. Some people put that down to the effectiveness of ProAct and ReAct. I cannot give him a detailed answer on spending in his part of the world, but I can tell him that in the past year, employment has risen in his constituency, inactivity has fallen and the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance fell in the past month.

Gloucester Works Project

10. **Mr. Parmjit Dhanda** (Gloucester) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Gloucester Works project. [304071]

The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Jim Knight): This is a good-quality project, providing support to unemployed people and businesses in Gloucester, and bringing together the public and private sectors to ensure that local communities benefit from regeneration. During the first phase of the Quays development, the project has delivered 236 jobs for local people, 67 per cent. of whom had previously been unemployed or facing redundancy. I was very pleased to see this for myself when I visited the project in October to meet people who have secured jobs thanks both to the investment Government are making and to the tireless work of their excellent local Member of Parliament.

Mr. Dhanda: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who will be aware that Gloucester Works has contributed to a reduction in unemployment in the city of Gloucester in four of the past six months. The project is worth something like £4 million of investment from the Government, so does he share my concern that that funding would not continue should the Opposition ever come to power?

Jim Knight: I share my hon. Friend's concern, because the funding has come from two organisations about which the Opposition are sceptical—the regional development agency and the European Union. As I have said, the project has delivered 236 jobs that would not be delivered if the Opposition's policies had their way.

Local Housing Allowance

14. **Mr. Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the rules governing local housing allowance. [304075]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson).

Mr. Goodwill: To return to where we were on Question 7, would the Minister be surprised to hear that, despite a private landlord contacting Scarborough borough council to inform it that three months' rent that had been paid to a tenant had not been passed on, and that, before eviction proceedings could take place, the tenant absconded, the council said that it had no alternative but to pay the subsequent payment to the tenant, although they had left the property with three months of arrears?

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman has told this story, but the overall picture is quite different. In total, across the whole country, there are a million people receiving local housing allowance. It is, on average, £110 a week, and they use that to pay their rent.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): I am sure the Minister saw the story in the newspapers last week of a family in west London who were receiving some £180,000 worth of benefits, most of which formed their housing allowance. The hon. Lady previously had plans to cap the very large sums of rent that were paid to families. Can she explain how such an extraordinary state of affairs came about?

Helen Goodman: We have already acted to cap those high levels of benefit by capping the local housing allowance to the five-bedroom rate. We will shortly be consulting on reform of housing benefit to make it fairer and support access to reasonably priced accommodation. The hon. Lady makes a fair point. Nobody expects housing benefit to pay for a small number of people to live in extremely expensive accommodation, but I point out to her that fewer than 100 households across the whole country receive housing benefit of more than £1,000 a week.

Unemployment

16. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to reduce the level of unemployment; and if she will make a statement. [304077].

The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Jim Knight): We are taking decisive steps to reduce the level of unemployment, as we have been discussing. Since November 2008, the Government have made available £5 billion to provide more support to jobseekers prior to redundancy, when they are newly unemployed, and at the six and 12-month points of their claim.

Mr. Hoyle: My right hon. Friend rightly describes what has been put in place when people are unemployed. Would it not make sense to support people while they are in the workplace? Perhaps we ought to introduce something similar to the ProAct scheme. In that way we will be subsidising people to keep their jobs, rather than retraining them at the jobcentre afterwards.

Jim Knight: Thanks to the extra £5 billion that we are spending, one of the areas of investment has been in the rapid response service, which goes into workplaces and works with those immediately facing redundancy, before they start their claim for jobseeker's allowance, reskilling them so that they can go straight into a different sort of job. In respect of ProAct and whether we should have some kind of wage subsidy scheme, in England we have

chosen not to go down that road because of other schemes that are in place. We have heard some debate today about its effectiveness or otherwise in Wales.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): Can the Minister tell me why, when in 1997 youth unemployment in the Vale of York and across the country was going down dramatically, we now have record levels of youth unemployment in the Vale of York, as well as those 18 to 24-year-olds not in employment or training?

Jim Knight: This may come as a surprise to the hon. Lady, but there has been a global recession. Thanks to that, unemployment has risen, which normally happens during recessions. It has happened during every previous recession, but the measures that have been taken—the £5 billion that we have invested—have lessened the impact of unemployment. We have done considerably better during the present recession than in previous ones.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend urge our right hon. Friend the Chancellor not to cut public spending in the areas of public services and construction in particular, which are labour intensive and should make a considerable contribution to future employment?

Jim Knight: Naturally, we are deep in discussions with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but it is beyond my pay grade to comment at this point on the outcome of those discussions.

Private Pension Schemes

17. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): When she next expects to meet representatives of occupational pension campaign groups to discuss private pension schemes that have been wound up. [304078]

The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society (Angela Eagle): My predecessors and I have frequently met representatives of occupational pension campaign groups and trade unions, and I will continue to do so.

Mr. Bellingham: The Minister will know that I represent a number of constituents who are in occupational pension schemes that have failed. That has caused substantial concern and grief. Can she confirm that the financial assistance scheme will pay out the 90 per cent. as promised, without conditions? Can she also confirm that there will be full protection for widows and partners of deceased members of schemes?

Angela Eagle: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman represents areas where there are pensioners in several schemes that have entered the financial assistance scheme because he has been in correspondence with me about that, and I have been more than happy to correspond with him in reply. I can confirm the promise that we issued when we introduced the financial assistance scheme: that members would get 90 per cent. of expected pension, subject to the cap, revalued from the date of wind-up. This is not the pension that they could have expected to retire on if they had continued paying all the way to retirement, but the rights that they had accrued to date.

Disability Living Allowance/Attendance Allowance

18. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury) (Con): What plans the Government have for the future of disability living allowance and attendance allowance. [304079]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Jonathan Shaw): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave earlier to the hon. Members for Harwich (Mr. Carswell) and for Southend, West (Mr. Amess).

Mr. O'Brien: The Minister did, indeed, reply to Question 4, and his response centred on the rising elderly population and on the escalating costs. He rested his case on false accusations of scaremongering, but I have with me a number of letters from real people, showing the vulnerability that they feel in the light of the threatened withdrawal of attendance allowance and disability living allowance. Why do the Government so blatantly discriminate against the over-65s on disability living allowance?

Jonathan Shaw: The arrangements for disability living allowance have been in place for many years, and they precede this Government's entry into office, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, and as I am sure he will tell the people who have written to him. We need to set out a new care system. People want a system that ends the postcode lottery: they want a system whereby, if they move from one town to another, they do not have to battle to receive such services. In my earlier reply, I said that an existent pensioner claimant who is in receipt of attendance allowance or disability living allowance will get the same cash total under the new system. In order to reassure the people who have written to him, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will tell them that, and not repeat the scaremongering that we have heard from those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Topical Questions

T1. [304086] **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Yvette Cooper): Today, the Secretary of State for Health and I announced a number of publications on mental health conditions and employment. Because of the devastating impact that mental health can have on people and their families, we know that it also costs the economy between £30 billion and £40 billion in lost production, sick pay, NHS treatment and unemployment. We want to do more not only to help people—and their families—who have mental health conditions, but to improve their employment chances, because that is good for the economy, as well as for such individuals and their families. Later this week, the Department will publish its back to work White Paper, with extra help for young people and others who are struggling to find work.

Ann Winterton: But does the Secretary of State recall the parable of the 10 wise and foolish virgins? Would it not have been wiser for the Government to have prevented the £3 billion worth of benefit fraud and overpayment each year, rather than to set up yet another taskforce, which is foolishly 12 years' too late?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Lady will realise that the Government have done a huge amount of work to reduce fraud and overpayments. The progress that we have made has been hugely important, but we want to go further, so it is right that we look both throughout the government and in the private sector at how we can go further and build on the very considerable progress that has already been made.

Jessica Morden (Newport, East) (Lab): A constituent of mine, who was successfully helped back into work by the new deal for lone parents, found herself within 3p of losing her carer's allowance when the minimum wage went up in October. What work is the Department doing to synchronise minimum wage rises with the earnings threshold for carer's allowance?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and we are looking at what more can be done to help carers who are often very keen to work, even if they are able to do so for only a limited number of hours, so that they can combine such work with their caring responsibilities. That is one of the issues that we have looked at as part of the back to work White Paper—how we do more to support carers and parents who need more flexible work. I am happy to talk further to my hon. Friend about that issue and the concerns of her constituent.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): May I tell the Secretary of State of a constituent who came to see me on Saturday morning? His partner died on 8 September, and he is having tremendous problems getting the child benefit and tax credits that should be paid over to him. He is in desperate straits, and so are his children—obviously suffering the terrible loss of their mother. If I give the Secretary of State's office the details, will she ensure that the situation is sorted out by Christmas?

Yvette Cooper: I can say that I will look into this immediately. If the right hon. Gentleman gives me the details today, I will get my office on to it straight away. It is important that people are provided with rapid support at a very difficult time. We are trying to work right across government so that, particularly in cases of bereavement, it is possible for people to tell not only our Department but any other area of government, just once, about what has happened so that all areas of government concerned can work together to provide that support rapidly. I am very sorry to hear of the hon. Gentleman's constituent's case.

T2. [304087] **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): This morning, together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, I had the pleasure of attending a youth impact project run by Charlton Athletic community trust in partnership with CARE—the Charlton Athletic race equality project. The project works with NEETs—people not in education, employment or training—and it has had a high success rate. We heard some very moving stories from young people who had been through the project. The funding for this successful project comes to an end in March, and it is looking for funding to take the project forward. May I urge the Secretary of State to enter into negotiations with such projects in order to get secure funding?

The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Jim Knight): I am very encouraged to hear the stories of how successful Charlton Athletic is being in engaging with young people in my hon. Friend's constituency. Last week, I was at Stamford Bridge to take part in the launch of the premier league Into Work initiative, which is trying to do similar things. It might be worth Charlton's linking up with the premier league and Richard Scudamore on that work.

I am happy to discuss funding with my hon. Friend to see whether there is any more that we can do.

T5. [304090] **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury) (Con): Given the exchanges that we have had on Questions 4, 11 and 18, and the Government's attempts to suggest that nobody who is on existing benefits will suffer, can the Minister give the equivalent promise that those in future need will have equivalent benefits in cash?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Jonathan Shaw): The hon. Gentleman knows that we have a Green Paper, on which we are consulting, to provide—*[Interruption.]* To answer the sedentary question, the problem is that we have an ageing population with increasing demands, and we need to find solutions in order to meet those demands. We have a Green Paper, which we are consulting on, and we are listening carefully to what people have to say. We need to ensure that those who are most vulnerable—those in the greatest need—*[Interruption]* If the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) would listen, I repeat that those in the greatest need require support and care, but all she is doing is scaremongering about elderly people in a vulnerable situation. We will come forward with a national care service that will be popular and will meet the needs of future generations, whereas the Conservatives have a blank sheet of paper and can offer nothing other than—

Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Rubbish!

Jonathan Shaw: As the hon. Gentleman says, all they can offer is rubbish.

T7. [304092] **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): The future jobs fund has the potential to provide 134 new jobs in my area after the Conservative-controlled local authority submitting bids to the fund. However, can the Minister help me with a dilemma—namely, how does the position of my local authority square with the position of the Conservative party?

Jonathan Shaw: My hon. Friend knows that the future jobs fund is creating jobs in the Dumfries and Galloway council area in gardening, community development and customer services. I take on board his comments in welcoming it. As for how it squares with the policy of the Conservative party centrally, it does not. The Conservatives opposed the investment, and the borrowing that financed it, which has been spent on the future jobs fund. Without that investment put in by this Labour Government, my hon. Friend would not have those 91 jobs in his constituency.

T6. [304091] **Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that poverty, unemployment and repossessions started to rise as early as 2004?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that as a result of the support that we have put in, particularly for those who are at risk of losing their mortgages, the number of repossessions has in fact been considerably lower than people expected at the beginning of the recession. That has helped a lot of families who had lost their jobs and were at risk of losing their homes to stay in their homes and to get additional support, whether from their local council, from the Government, or from their mortgage company. That has been helpful, and it means that we have not been turning our backs on people as the hon. Gentleman's party did in the early '90s.

T8. [304093] **Jim Sheridan** (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): Despite resistance from the official Opposition, the Access to Work scheme has proven extremely successful in either getting disabled people back to work or getting them the benefits that they are entitled to. However, there remains a problem for people with autism in trying to get back into work or get their benefits. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meet representatives from the National Autistic Society to explore whether the difficulties can be solved?

Jonathan Shaw: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his commitment to working with people with autism and all disabilities. We seek to provide more opportunities to get into work, and disabled people have seen employment levels rise by about 10 per cent. in recent years, assisted by Access to Work, for which we are doubling the resources to about £138 million, helping about 34,000 people. However, we do need to do more to help people with autism, and I will be pleased to meet him and representatives of the NAS to discuss how we might make Access to Work more flexible and tailor-make it for people such as he refers to.

T9. [304094] **David T.C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Despite promises of action back in October, Ministers have continued happily to pay for a family of Afghans to live in a seven-bedroom, £1 million townhouse in west London. Will they now offer the same right to homeless ex-British soldiers living on the streets of London?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): As I said in answer to an earlier question, the number of people being paid exceptionally high levels of local housing allowance, which I agree are not acceptable, is very small indeed. We will bring forward proposals to tackle the problem in our consultation document on housing benefit, but the hon. Gentleman sheds no light whatever on the matter by suggesting that it is somehow to do with immigration.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): On 1 November 2008, the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission took over the Child Support Agency, which had a woeful record of using its enforcement powers. Can the Minister tell me, if not today then later, how many driving licences were removed in each of the past five years? Was that power ever used?

Helen Goodman: I am sorry, but I cannot give my hon. Friend that information immediately. I will have to write to him. As he knows, that is an additional power that we are using to get more non-paying, non-resident parents to pay the maintenance that they owe their children.

T10. [304095] **Mr. Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I sat down at the weekend to help a constituent fill out an application for disability living allowance, and I was appalled at the length and complexity of the form. Have Ministers ever tried filling one out for themselves? If so, what suggestions do they have for making the process far less lengthy and complex?

Jonathan Shaw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will appreciate the competing demands in any benefit form. On one hand we must get the right information, and on the other we want to ensure that there is no fraud and mitigate against appeals, which we want to reduce. We have recently revised the DLA form for children, which has been welcomed by a number of children's organisations. We keep all benefits under review and work in partnership with a range of organisations that advise us, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and his constituent understand those competing demands.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): In a few moments we will hear more about smarter government. The Department is leading the Government's "Tell us once" programme, which reduces the number of times individuals have to contact Government to tell them about changes that have affected them. How is it going?

Jonathan Shaw: The "Tell us once" initiative has been very effective, bringing together a number of agencies. For example, there has been some excellent work on bereavement in particular, especially children's bereavement, by St. Guy's and St. Thomas's hospital and Lambeth council. We want that successful initiative, which reduces bureaucracy and eases people's pain, to be expanded, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be satisfied with the responses on it that come forward.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State be able to offer any Christmas cheer to those of my pensioner constituents who are victims of Equitable Life?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman will know that Judge Chadwick is currently reviewing the circumstances of many people who were affected by Equitable Life, and that there are a lot of problems for a lot of pensioners who have been badly affected. The Government have said that additional support should be given, and we are waiting for Judge Chadwick's response.

NHS IT Programme

3.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con) *(Urgent Question)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the future of the NHS IT programme, and if he will make a statement.

The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham): I want to begin by challenging the myth put around by the hon. Gentleman that the NHS IT programme has been a waste. The programme has changed the way in which the Government pay for IT by creating a contract whereby we pay for what we get from suppliers only when it is fully delivered. Indeed, we have been praised by the National Audit Office for creating such a contract.

The national programme comprises a number of key elements that are already essential to the delivery of front-line services. For instance, digital X-rays and scans, which facilitate faster safer care, are in place in 100 per cent. of hospital trusts; electronic prescriptions are now the norm in general practitioner systems; choose and book—the electronic booking service—provides choice and convenience for patients; GP2GP—the electronic transfer of health records between GP practices—will in time support our policy of abolishing practice boundaries, giving patients more choice; and we also have the summary care record, whereby key information from the patient's GP record, including current prescriptions and reactions to medicines, can be made readily available.

To put it simply, the programme is a key part of delivering modern, safe, joined-up health care. It is supporting the ongoing reform of the NHS by giving choice and convenience to patients. The NHS could not function without it. However, in the current climate it is right to look again at efficiencies and value for money on all big projects, and at the Chancellor of the Exchequer's request—and that is what the Minister of State, Department of Health, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) and I have been doing across my Department.

As part of that, I have looked closely at options for savings on the NHS IT system; it was to those that the Chancellor referred yesterday. The details of those discussions with the IT companies are commercially sensitive and ongoing, but I can give the House this update. My aim in conducting this exercise has been to ensure that the elements of the IT programme that can deliver most benefit to patients and front-line staff are taken forward, while cancelling certain additions to the system where it makes sense to do so.

Let me be absolutely clear: we have no intention whatsoever of cancelling the programme overall, not least because it is already making the NHS safer, more efficient and more convenient for patients. However, we are discussing with our suppliers potential reductions to the scope of the systems and the cost savings that could be generated. In addition, we are looking seriously into the internal savings that can be made from the costs of running the programme. In the light of that work, I can confirm to the House that we are working towards achieving a reduction of £600 million in the lifetime costs of the programme.

That means that we will now pare back the programme to the core elements that have been identified as critical by clinicians. Our aim is to give trusts more flexibility and choice of IT systems, within a framework provided by existing contracts, to keep the benefits of a national approach. Specifically, that could include the IT systems that clinicians have told us are most important to them, such as electronic prescribing; enabling local innovation to take place by linking national systems with those provided by local service providers; and allowing the NHS to design IT systems to fit its local needs.

The programme has already provided benefits, and we believe that this approach will accelerate the delivery of benefits to front-line services and patients across the NHS.

Mr. Lansley: Oh dear, Mr. Speaker. Rarely have we seen a more abject example of the Government's incompetence. They took central control of NHS IT—£7.5 billion in central contracts and £5 billion in associated costs on top of that. Seven years on, they are over budget and under-delivered. The electronic patient record is four years late at the very best—if it will ever happen. Everyone told them that big IT projects had to be user led, but that one was not. We told them that the system should be decentralised, with local procurement and patient control over health records, but they did not listen. Now the Chancellor of the Exchequer says it has to stop. The Secretary of State is clearly not in charge. The Government got it wrong and the Treasury is now belatedly putting a stop to the continuing disaster.

Let me ask the Secretary of State some questions. Will he now stop the centralised care record system and allow local procurement of care record systems to national standards? Will he allow general practitioners and hospital trusts to be purchasers of their own IT hardware and software from open sources of supply? Will he now be open about the contractual situation with the three local service providers, and about whether, as we suspect, it would now be possible to abandon the existing contracts without penalties—in either direction—because the costs of fulfilling the contracts to the companies exceed the value of the contracts to them? That could deliver up to £4 billion, unspent under those contracts, for support for front-line IT and other services in the NHS.

Will the Secretary of State now have the grace to acknowledge the Government's failure, the billions of pounds spent without delivery, the spiralling opportunity costs of delays, the confusion and frustrations over IT and choose and book, but—worst of all—the resulting lack of IT innovation in our hospitals, when it has the potential to be of such benefit to patients in managing their care and minimising errors in treatment? Will the Secretary of State just admit that they got it hopelessly wrong?

Andy Burnham: Let me begin with a phrase that the hon. Gentleman used towards the end of his contribution, about the "lack of IT innovation" in hospitals. I do not know how many he has visited recently, but I do not understand how he can make such a comment on the Floor of the House. The step change in the quality of images available to clinicians is evident to anybody who looks at the NHS today, and because people all around the hospital can view clear images, that has been a real benefit for patient safety across the NHS. I simply do not believe that there has been no innovation or improvement in services. Indeed, clinicians—not

[Andy Burnham]

Ministers—have today spoken in favour of the changes brought about by the national programme for IT across the NHS—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Mr. O'Brien, you have developed a bad habit of chuntering away from a sedentary position on the Opposition Front Bench, in evident disapproval of the answer from the Minister. The question has been asked: the answer must be heard.

Andy Burnham: Before I was so rudely interrupted, I was saying that it is clinicians who have come out today to say that they value the improvements that the national programme for IT has brought. The hon. Gentleman would do well to listen to those voices before he comes here and makes sweeping statements suggesting that that programme has brought no benefit to patients.

The hon. Gentleman said that the programme was over budget and under-delivered. In my statement I mentioned the views of the National Audit Office, and I hope that he will acknowledge that the programme has been praised by the NAO. Its 2006 report said:

"The Office of Government Commerce considered there to be many good features in the procurement process for wider application to government IT procurement. These included elements of contract innovation, which it has built on to develop its good practice guidance."

It is simply not true to say that this programme is flawed and has not delivered benefits: it has delivered considerable benefits to the NHS and has improved the way in which the NHS contracts for IT. We get what we pay for, and the NHS has learned the lessons of IT failures in the past.

The hon. Gentleman said that the programme was over budget and under-delivered: it is not, and never has been, over budget. The last NAO report confirmed that the cost of the original contracts had not changed and that the overall programme costs, including NHS costs and the costs of additional items such as payment by results and the 18 weeks, are substantially unchanged from the figure of £12.4 billion in the earlier NAO report.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the care records system. That will be a matter for local choice—[Hon. Members: "Ah!"] I said in my statement that we wanted to create a system in which acute hospitals had more choice and flexibility in relation to their IT requirements within a national system. He seems to reject the benefits of a national system across the NHS, but we do not. We believe that there are significant benefits from a national health service having a programme of IT that can link up clinicians across the system. We further believe that it is safer for patients if their records can be accessed across the system.

Let me finish with a comment on the hon. Gentleman's plans for IT in the NHS.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not think that we need to go into that. I know that the Secretary of State has been provoked by quite a lot of sedentary chuntering, which I have just deprecated, but may I urge him to be economical in his replies? I am keen to get Back Benchers in as well.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The Secretary of State was provoked into whistling in the dark by claiming that the programme had been a success. He quoted the NAO report, but did not the Public Accounts Committee conclude in January that the programme was, among other things, "very disappointing," and

"not providing value for money,"

that estimates of costs were "unreliable", and that the system had "little clinical functionality", as well as reporting

"understandable concerns about data security"?

That does not sound to me like a system that is going well. Is this not the classic case of an IT programme that is too big, too expensive, too late and insufficiently planned? By building the system from the top down, the Government have smothered the option of local schemes with interoperability, which would, I agree, have been a better solution.

Do the enormous compensation counter-claims by suppliers of which we read represent a contingent liability against the NHS? If so, does that mean that they will be paid at the expense of front-line services? The Government's dithering over cancellations of quite large elements of the scheme has resulted in eye-wateringly large amounts of money being sunk in a scheme that has produced nothing like the benefits claimed for it, but which has, I am afraid, used a great deal of NHS money for very little result.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman also seems to have misunderstood the very nature of the contract. It was an innovative contract that meant that the NHS paid only once it received the system and the system had been passed over and was operational. That was a step forward in how the NHS paid for IT systems.

The hon. Gentleman quoted the NAO at me, but the NAO recognised the improvement in contracting that came with the system. If he is saying that it is not right, in the current climate, for me to take a look at the system and see whether we can make savings, then quite honestly I disagree with him. It is right that we should look at the system again in the current climate and, where we can, make savings.

Let us be absolutely clear: we are being led by clinicians on this issue. They are saying to us that they value the improvements in patient safety and the reduction in errors that have come with the national IT programme. The British Medical Association issued a statement today to that effect, and I think that I would prefer to listen to the BMA than to the hon. Gentleman.

We can make savings and pare the system down to the core elements that have been identified as important by the clinical community. If I may, let me give the hon. Gentleman a specific example of those changes. We have made a big investment in GP systems. GP systems are working well across the country and have high levels of satisfaction. GPs are happy with them and they are internationally recognised. Recognising that, we have agreed that we will not now go ahead with the replacement of further enhancements to that system, because people are happy with it. It is working well, and technology makes it possible for those parts of the system to talk to other parts.

We are looking at the system again in a new financial context, but the technology also makes possible other developments that were not available to us when the programme began. It is right that we should always re-examine the system in the context of current developments.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In rejecting the siren voices from those on the Opposition Benches, who clearly know very little about computer systems, may I ask my right hon. Friend to undertake some research into the productivity gains that some of the systems have produced? As a customer of the health service over a number of years and from discussions with consultants, I can say that it is unambiguously clear that massive improvements have been made. However, they need to be studied and published, so that people understand properly the value of that incredibly sensible investment.

Andy Burnham: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. For instance, the widespread use of the choose and book system in general practice makes it much easier for GPs to have direct access to referrals in secondary care. I would argue that that cuts out significant amounts of time in the referral process. It is also better for patients, because they can see in their GP surgery, and have explained to them, the options open to them in booking a secondary appointment. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend: there are huge productivity gains to be had for the NHS and it is right that we press on with the system.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): I am left gasping by this woeful performance. The Secretary of State talked about GPs doing well, but GP Systems of Choice was the reason why they were doing well—and that system came before the national programme. It is also no accident that he referred to digital scanning. That was added to the programme in September 2004, and it is an example of something that worked; it had nothing to do with central patient records. I could go on about this for ages, but you would not let me, Mr. Speaker. Can the Secretary of State explain how the NHS could not operate without the system, as he says, while at the same time the Chancellor of the Exchequer says that it is of no value to the front line? Which is it?

Andy Burnham: I said clearly that there are elements of the scheme that can now be pared back. I also made it clear that one of those elements was the enhancement to the GP system, which is unnecessary because GPs are happy with how the system is working now. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that there have been no benefits for hospitals from the PAC—picture archiving and communications—system, I do not agree with him. There have been significant benefits for patient safety and the reduction of errors. The strong support from clinicians for the system that they now have refutes what the hon. Gentleman has just said.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): In conducting the review, will the Secretary of State also look at the business service authority's plans to outsource its IT infrastructure? In doing that, it has ignored the views of the work force about where the greatest savings could be made.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend raises a separate issue, and I promise to come back to him with a detailed reply. It is important in the coming period for the NHS to make savings from back-office functions. That is the right thing to do in the current climate, so that we can put every possible support into the NHS front line. I will give my hon. Friend a detailed answer on shared business services.

Mr. John Baron (Billericay) (Con): The history of this Government's involvement in major IT projects has been woeful, as was confirmed by the latest Public Accounts Committee report. For future reference, will the Secretary of State explain why this major IT programme was imposed from the top, rather than being user led?

Andy Burnham: It was both. There was a clear drive to improve IT across the NHS, and I make no apology for that. To support the reform in the NHS that this Government wanted to see, we needed a better IT system that reflected a national health service, and could be interoperable across the huge NHS system. Choose and book has facilitated the policy of giving patients choice, and I have mentioned the GP2GP system in which whole patient records can be transferred electronically. That will soon support the abolition of practice boundaries, so that people can have a full choice of GP. We are supporting reform in the national health service, but we have listened at all times to the voices of the clinicians. That is why they have come out today and strongly supported the system.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): A quarter of all prescriptions go to pharmacies electronically; I think that that involves about 155 million prescriptions. How will my Friend's statement today affect the future of the electronic prescription service?

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend is right to focus on the potential benefit of electronic prescribing. In my view, it could be further developed. He cites a figure for electronic transfer between GP surgeries and pharmacies, and I think that there is scope for further progress so that we could move to a paperless system for prescriptions. I will give him an update in due course, but this is an important area that is working. As I said in my statement, where the system is working, we will press on and ensure that we derive full benefits for the NHS front line.

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): If there is any further delay in the summary care record, will the Secretary of State look at the work being done by Coventry university and the City university, London? They are producing a most exciting, cheap, simple, personalised smartcard with an extendable memory stick, which could solve most of the problems of the summary care record.

Andy Burnham: I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that I will take a look at that particular system. As I said to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) a few moments ago, as we hear of good practice around the system and as developments in technology make it possible for new developments to be considered, it is always right for us to reflect on them to see whether we can improve the system. Knowing the

[Andy Burnham]

hon. Gentleman as I do, I suspect that that initiative has the strong endorsement of clinicians and has been led by clinicians, so I give him the assurance that I will take a further look at it.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): Of the NHS IT programme, the Secretary of State said earlier today in the House that the Government would "only pay once it has been received and is operational". As a measure of the proportion of the NHS IT programme that is operational, will the Secretary of State tell the House what percentage of the cost has been paid by the NHS so far?

Andy Burnham: I have a precise figure, but it is not in front of me right now. I can tell my hon. Friend, from memory, that I believe that about 40 to 50 per cent. has been paid out so far. While the overall contract value has not changed, with this contract we pay only as we receive the benefits. I will come back to my hon. Friend with the precise figures. As of today, however, we are making clear our intention to make £600 million savings from the overall contract value, which will be achieved by paring back elements of the system that we do not believe are any longer necessary.

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State please say what the effects of the proposed cuts will be on the interoperability of the English and Welsh NHS IT systems? This has already been a cause of concern to, among others, the BMA in Wales.

Andy Burnham: I am afraid that I will have to reply later to the hon. Gentleman about whether the changes that we are announcing today will have any impact on hospital administration in Wales, but I give him an assurance that I will come back to him on that subject.

Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): We all listened with interest to the Secretary of State's excuses, and with some disbelief to his comments. However, can he advise us whether the taxpayer is likely to face any contractual penalties after his statement today?

Andy Burnham: We have relationships with the commercial sector here, and as I said in my statement, some are commercially sensitive. We want to deliver a successful system, while also recognising that the companies involved have contractual commitments. We are working through those issues; that is why I gave a broad update on the discussions. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would accept that I cannot go into much more detail. Let me make one further point: this is about delivering a system that is affordable, but also does a good job. We are not going to do it on the cheap, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) suggests. I fear that the proposal to hand over the job to Google or Microsoft, or whoever else the Opposition have in mind, would simply not do a secure job for the NHS. If the hon. Gentleman wanted to do things on the cheap, I think that he would pay the price later.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is absolutely unbelievable that the Secretary of State can come to this House without knowledge of the contingent liability to the NHS resulting from the cancellation of the contracts. Will he please say now what the contingent liability is, and stop dodging the question?

Andy Burnham: That is not what I said; perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not listening or paying attention. We have a contractual commitment and, as I said to his hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) a moment ago, the discussions are commercially sensitive. I am afraid that I am not going to go into those details on the Floor of the House today, although if I can provide the hon. Gentleman with any further details through correspondence, I will do so.

Smarter Government

3.53 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on "Putting the Frontline First: smarter government", a Command Paper that I am presenting to Parliament today.

This Government are very proud of Britain's public services and Britain's public servants: our doctors and nurses, who treat 1 million people every 36 hours; our police teams, who have brought down crime by a third; the teachers and support staff in our schools, who have helped record numbers of young people get record exam results this year; our job centre staff, who have helped 2 million people move off unemployment since last November; and, of course, our armed forces, serving with such distinction in Afghanistan and around the world.

We always knew that with the right backing, Britain's public servants could transform the quality and standards of public service in this country, and over the last decade they have—not by some happy accident, but by the work of careful design and determined investment. NHS investment has doubled, education investment is up by 60 per cent. and investment in public order and safety is up by 50 per cent. All that was achieved while over-delivering by 20 per cent. on our Gershon review savings of £26.5 billion in the three years to 2008.

Thanks to that effort, we have reached a point at which the investment gap that we inherited in 1997 has been fixed. We have not only reached but exceeded international averages for spending on education and health. We are at a turning point. In the decade ahead we can capitalise on the great strengths that we have created, and set out a new way of driving standards in public services up, while we drive the deficit down.

I am laying before the House today a Command Paper showing how the Government will set about that task in the years to come. It draws together more than 12 months' work from literally thousands of people across public life, the private sector, charities and voluntary groups. I particularly thank Sir Michael Bichard, Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Nigel Shadbolt, Martha Lane-Fox, our efficiency advisers Gerry Grimstone, Lord Carter of Coles, Martin Read and Martin Jay, and those from across the third sector who have advanced the relationship between Government and civic society.

Today's Command Paper summarises what we have learned from that work, but our starting point is a relentless focus on standards. We are ambitious for Britain's future: we know that we can do well in the years to come. However, we know that if Britain's families are to do well in the future, they will need first-class public services to support them. We will make first-class standards in public services not a privilege for the few but the right of all, by setting out—in health, education, policing and, in time, social care—new entitlements to high-quality public services, backed where appropriate by the force of law.

To help citizens to hold local services to account, we will revolutionise the free availability of comparative information on police efficiency, hospital costs, and Government and local authority spending. We will ensure that services, where they can, fit in with the demands of modern life by putting more services online, and we will redouble our efforts to persuade more people to use the internet. Today I can announce the provision of a further £30 million with the aim of getting 1 million more people online by 2012. We will free public data created using taxpayers' money, including Ordnance Survey mapping and boundary information. We will make it easier for civic society to contribute to public life by pressing ahead with a new social investment bank, and by testing social impact bonds.

Our second principle will be to free up the front line to innovate and collaborate by cutting back on ring-fenced budgets and national targets. I am therefore setting out today 10 steps that I, with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, have drawn up to provide local councils with a range of trading, joint-venture and regulatory flexibilities. I believe that if we set in place strong rights to high standards and free up the front line to innovate, we can cut overhead costs at the centre.

We are already on track to deliver £30 billion of savings between 2008 and 2011, but today I am setting out steps to save £12 billion more, and in the pre-Budget report we will set out further difficult choices that will have to be made if we are to halve our deficit over four years.

First, we will reduce the costs of the senior civil service. I am announcing today that we will reduce senior civil service costs by 20 per cent. by 2012-13, and seek to move 10 per cent. of civil service posts that are currently in London and the south-east to other parts of the country in the medium term.

Secondly, Bill Cockburn, chair of the Senior Salaries Pay Review Body, will review senior pay across the whole of the public sector, reporting to Government in time for next year's Budget. In the meantime, I will personally review all proposals for salary offers above £150,000 set by Government.

Thirdly, we are publishing today plans drawn up by all Secretaries of State to increase the administrative efficiency for which they are accountable in human resources, IT, collaborative procurement and asset management. I am also publishing benchmarking information for all central Government Departments and major agencies, showing exactly where we will focus to deliver £9 billion of efficiency savings over the next few years. I am also today setting a goal of saving £1.3 billion by putting services online, halving the consultancy bill and reducing our marketing spend by a quarter.

Fourthly, I am announcing today the first results of a comprehensive review of arm's-length bodies, which will report by the time of the 2010 Budget. We will save £500 million a year from changes introduced by the review, and as an interim step we will abolish or rationalise 123 arm's-length bodies, subject to the necessary consultation and legislation.

Finally, I believe that, as part of this new future, the Government must either sell or transfer to different owners the things they no longer need to own. I am therefore publishing today an asset portfolio listing the state-owned assets that Government can commercialise over the medium term. It includes options for the future sale of the Tote, the student loan book, the Dartford crossing and the high-speed rail link, and potential alternative forms of ownership of British Waterways

[Mr. Liam Byrne]

agreed by myself and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Our policy will also include a new approach for testing where publicly owned assets should be transferred for use by the third sector.

The Government believe this country is both richer and fairer for the strength of our public services. We will never compromise on high standards, but neither will we ever compromise in our search for value for money. Today's Command Paper sets a new path for the future that draws on the strengths created through a decade's work, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I am grateful to the Chief Secretary for letting me have a copy of his statement in advance—not that it, or the Prime Minister's speech this morning, tells us anything much that we have not heard before. The paper is a series of reheated announcements that underline Labour's failure over 12 years to get to grips with public service reform and to cut the waste and inefficiency that have been allowed to multiply.

We were told that all services would be available online, but Tony Blair pledged in 2000 that all services would be available online by 2005, and they were not. The Government tell us they will roll out a "tell us once" service for births and deaths, but they have already told us about "tell us once" three times. There is also the reannouncement of the sale of the Tote: that is a 1997 manifesto commitment that has been reannounced several times since, most recently about six weeks ago at that Dispatch Box. The story is the same for crime mapping, ring-fencing, NHS tariffs, e-auctions, and so on and so on. In addition to the reheated announcements, there is the usual sprinkling of stolen policies: the quango cull that the Leader of the Opposition announced in July this year, and the high-level sign-off for top public sector salaries.

There are also the pledges to undo some of the damage the Government themselves have done during their 12 years in office. The Prime Minister said in this morning's speech that the Government will cut marketing and communications spend by 25 per cent.—after more than quadrupling it since 1997. Since 2000, they have poured billions of pounds of taxpayers' money into unreformed public services, borrowing and spending like it was Monopoly money, and talking about efficiency but never delivering it.

That has happened not because the Government do not understand—the Prime Minister said in a speech to the Institute of Directors in 2001:

> "The efficiency we seek in the private sector we demand in the public sector...Government at every level—national, regional and local—must raise its game."

It is also not because they did not have good advice—tens of thousands of man-hours spent on reviews and report writing have identified tens of billions of pounds-worth of potential efficiencies. But the Government have not been able to translate that into real cashable savings. Gershon identified £21.5 billion-worth of savings, and while the Chief Secretary has just claimed some fantasy figure for delivered Gershon savings, the National Audit Office says the Government only delivered £3.5 billion in real, hard cashable saving. That is less than 0.1 per cent. of total public spending over the period in question.

Today, Sir Peter Gershon has joined our public services advisory board, along with Mr. Bernard Gray, the author of the defence procurement report whose conclusions were so damning that the Prime Minister tried to suppress it, and Dr. Martin Read, whom the Chief Secretary has just mentioned and who chaired the Government operational efficiency review. They will advise us as we develop our agenda for a truly radical, bottom-up reform of public service delivery, based on the principles of transparency, alignment of incentives, freedoms to innovate and support for change. They will help us to deliver a genuine culture change in Government and public services by ensuring that efficiency gain and productivity improvement become a central part of the day-to-day business of our public sector, not some alien imposition visited upon it whenever an election is approaching.

The truth is that our front-line public services can be protected for future generations only by genuine reforms—reforms that will close the productivity gap and ensure that those services are affordable for future generations. For 12 years, Labour has demonstrated that it can talk about efficiency but it cannot deliver. The Government's record speaks for itself. Between 1997 and 2007, according to the Office for National Statistics, public sector productivity fell by 3.4 per cent. while private service sector productivity grew by more than 20 per cent. That is a measure of the scale of Labour's failure on public sector efficiency. When the Government have failed so comprehensively for 12 years, why should anybody believe that they will succeed with this mishmash of reheated announcements and stolen clothes in the dying months of their rule?

The Government are ducking the hard questions. The Chancellor is talking about reducing spending while the Prime Minister is making new spending pledges at his party conference and the Schools Secretary and the Transport Secretary are telling us that their budgets will not be cut. Will the Chief Secretary confirm today that there will not be a departmental spending review before the Budget in the spring? Is that what the Chancellor of the Exchequer was telling us yesterday?

As the Chief Secretary has adopted a raft of our policy proposals, let us see whether he will match some of our pledges. Will he, for example, match our pledge to cut by one third the administrative cost of Whitehall bureaucracy and quangos during the lifetime of the next Parliament, saving £3 billion a year for the front line? Will he cap the biggest Whitehall pensions, as we have pledged to do, so that the taxpayer will not contribute any further to pensions that are already worth £50,000 or more? Will he give some clear purpose to these efficiency savings by matching our pledge to deliver real-terms spending increases year on year to the national health service, protecting our most important public service?

The Prime Minister said in his speech this morning that

> "there will be no hiding place for Ministers or civil servants who fail to drive increasing efficiencies".

Let me tell him that there is no hiding place for a Prime Minister who has not only failed to deliver value for money in public spending, but been the roadblock to real reform for a decade. Today's offering is too little and, for the Prime Minister and his Government, it is too late.

Mr. Speaker: May I say for future reference that the response from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman was longer than the statement itself, and we really do not want that to happen again?

Mr. Byrne: I shall be brief in my reply, Mr. Speaker. That was an extraordinary response. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) claims that there has been no reform in public services. Crime down by a third is reform. He says that there is no reform, but exam results are 50 per cent. better for our young people. That is real reform. He says that there is no public service reform, but getting people in to hospital in four and half weeks instead of 18 months is real reform that the public care about.

The hon. Gentleman prayed in aid the NAO. The truth is that when the NAO considered the Gershon savings, it said:

"Projects across the Programme are making"

real

"improvements to the efficiency of public services."

It went on to say that all of the £26.5 billion savings met the most robust category in its conclusions. The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about productivity and tried to pray in aid some contributions from the ONS. Of course, the ONS said:

"These are experimental statistics and work continues to develop the measures."

I know that there is a taste for experimentation among some people on the hon. Gentleman's team. I hope, however, that it does not extend to the selective use of statistics.

The hon. Gentleman talks about our matching his plan to save £3 billion from Whitehall. We are saying that we will save £12 billion, not only from Whitehall but from the wider public sector, over the next three to four years. Of course, there are a few proposals that I have examined in drawing up these efficiency plans today. I could, for example, have set out proposals to scrap ID cards, which I was told by some quarters would save £2 billion. In fact, on closer inspection, it turns out that that would save no more than £50 million to £100 million. I was told that abolishing regional development agencies would save "a huge amount." It turns out on closer inspection that it would save merely £180 million. I was told that capping public service pensions at £50,000 would save hundreds of millions of pounds. In fact, it turns out that it would save but a small fraction of that. I was told that taking child credits away from families who earn more than £150,000 would save £400 million a year, but it turns out that it would save only £45 million a year. I was told that bringing forward changes to the retirement age could save £13 billion a year, but it would make no impact whatever on the deficit in the next Parliament.

The truth is that every one of those proposals was put forward by the Conservatives, but it turns out that none of them was worth the paper it was written on. No wonder the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge has had to hire a group of Government advisers to answer an SOS—stand up our savings—from the shadow Chancellor, and no wonder he told us this morning that the front line would suffer under the Conservatives, because he has nothing else to pay for the £10 billion-worth of tax cuts that he has promised to people who are rich enough not to need them.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Much of the statement is uncontroversial and, indeed, blindingly obvious. Let me start with the efficiency savings. Is not there a basic problem with announced efficiency savings in Government? If they knew that there was inefficiency, why had not they dealt with it already? To what extent is this new?

Let me pick up on a particular item to clarify what the Government are doing. They say that they are cutting the consultancy budget by 50 per cent., but 50 per cent. of how much? What is their consultancy budget? There are estimates that it could be in the order of £20 billion. We discovered on Friday that they are paying more than £100 million a year for consultants who are advising on the bail-out of the banks alone, so what is the consultancy budget that is now being cut by half?

The Chief Secretary said that he is personally going to vet pay of more than £150,000 a year. He is going to be a very busy man. How many people in the public sector are paid more than £150,000 a year, whose salary he will vet personally? Are we talking about GPs and dentists, heads of quangos and the dozens of people in the BBC who are paid more than the Prime Minister? Whom does he mean and how many of them are there? Are we talking about hundreds or thousands of people?

The Chief Secretary also suggested that he will save lots of money by reducing the number of targets for, and the amount of, monitoring of local government. That is admirable, but I understand that the Government currently spend £1 billion to £1.5 billion on various audit bodies, notably the Audit Commission, in overseeing local government. How much of that budget will be saved and how many officials who are employed in overseeing local government will no longer be required? If he is genuine about restoring autonomy to local government, why does not he consider ideas such as giving them significantly greater freedom over the business rate system?

Let me make a specific point. The Chief Secretary says that the Government are to give away, free of charge, data from the Met Office and the Ordnance Survey. That sounds straightforward, but those organisations survive by selling data, so if they have to give their data away for free, how will they function as organisations, especially now that the Government plan to privatise them? How can the Government privatise organisations that do not have any income?

Mr. Byrne: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's welcome for at least some of these measures. I think that there is a direction of travel in some of the reforms that Liberal Democrat Members will welcome, not least the move towards greater freedom and flexibility for local authorities. When he has had time to study the report in some depth, I think that he will welcome some of the flexibilities that we have talked about. On Wednesday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will announce further measures, which attempt to bring a degree more freedom from the regime of inspection and performance setting that has helped to drive up service standards over the past 10 years. We will be able to retire some of that regime in the years to come, and there will be significant savings as a result. It is right that many of the relevant reductions in targets should wait until the next comprehensive spending review, so that the plans that are drawn up reflect the resources that are provided.

[Mr. Byrne]

The hon. Gentleman asked some specific questions that I will try to answer. First, he asked about consultancy bills. My goal is to save about £512 million from the consultancy bill by 2011-12, by reducing it by 50 per cent. He asked about pay, and I reiterate that we have asked Bill Cockburn, the chair of the Senior Salaries Review Body, to draw up proposals on how to bring greater transparency to the system of setting senior sector pay and how to make sure that value-for-money bodies such as the Audit Commission and others are given a greater role in scrutinising those offers. The simple answer is that I believe that too many people are paid more than £150,000, and my goal is to exert downward pressure. That is partly why I say that we should cut the costs of, for example, the senior civil service by 20 per cent. in the next couple of years.

On data, we must get the balance right. Organisations such as Ordnance Survey can make a great deal of money by supporting specialist engineering and mapping companies with high-quality data. Ordnance Survey runs one of the best—if not the best—mapping services in the world. When there are opportunities to make available information such as low-resolution maps or boundary data, the public should be able to get hold of it free of charge.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): Does the Chief Secretary agree that some of the biggest public expenditure is on late intervention and is the cost of failure—of prisons, magistrates courts, welfare benefits and so on? Does he therefore accept my welcome to the green shoots in the Green Paper, including the social investment wholesale bank—perhaps we can tidy up the names—and the social impact bonds? Those constitute early intervention and are cheaper and much more efficient because they ensure that society benefits from the consequences of success, rather than suffering those of failure.

Mr. Byrne: May I put on the record my personal thanks to my hon. Friend for his work in not only championing new approaches to early intervention, but bringing pressure to bear on finding innovative forms of social finance? Social impact bonds appear in today's Command Paper partly because of his work in lobbying for such change. In my authority of Birmingham, we have found that investment in early years can produce savings later in life. I think that Birmingham city council found that for every pound invested in early years, something like £4 could be saved in the criminal justice system later. Sometimes, different agencies from those responsible for early intervention reap the rewards of such intervention. Social impact bonds are a new way of bringing some of the incentives back into line. It is therefore right to test them out.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): The Prime Minister said this morning that in health, schools, policing and social services, there had been

"excessive salaries and unjustified bonuses".

Why were they allowed?

Mr. Byrne: The hon. Gentleman knows that in the British administration a great deal of flexibility is given to, for example, local authorities. That is why it is right to look hard now at not only what constitutes the right level of pay for senior executives in different parts of the public sector, but the legislative changes that may be required to enable Ministers, when necessary, to exert downward pressure. I do not think that such legislative power is currently available in some parts of our public life, such as universities, further education colleges or local councils, but we have asked Bill Cockburn and his advisers to tell us a little more about that.

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is looking to scrap or rationalise 123 quangos for starters—not before time. One chief executive of a quango told me that he was on £1,000 a day. That is disgraceful when there are public sector workers at the bottom who are paid £10,000 a year. We need to protect them and keep them in work to keep the economy going, and we need to ensure that we get rid of some of the fat cats.

Mr. Byrne: There are obviously some complicated parts of public administration in this country. For example, the health service is a big and important organisation, which spends somewhere north of £90 billion a year. We want first-class people running such organisations. However, in such times, it is incumbent on senior leaders in public life to show leadership on pay. The Government have therefore said to the pay review bodies that we expect a pay freeze for the senior civil service, and pay awards of no more than zero to 1 per cent. for civil servants more generally.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The Chief Secretary has talked about reducing senior civil service costs by 20 per cent. by 2012-13. What has he planned for redundancy costs? Will redundancy be voluntary or involuntary?

Mr. Byrne: Obviously, we hope to achieve most of our cost savings through voluntary redundancy, natural wastage and so on, but I certainly cannot stand here today and rule out the possibility of compulsory redundancy. The hon. Lady will know that we introduced reforms last week to the compensation arrangements available to civil servants, which are projected to save something like half a billion pounds over the next couple of years.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): The Chief Secretary will remember—and you will, too, Mr. Speaker—that about six weeks ago, I asked him about this crackpot proposal to privatise the Thurrock-Dartford crossing. I asked how it was going to be done and what his brief said, and he held up a blank sheet of paper. He will understand why I am irritated. What is the answer to my question of six weeks ago, and how is he going to do it, bearing in mind that tolling is only allowed under the European directive as a mechanism against congestion? It is not a cash register for the Treasury. How does he propose to sell this and offer the purchaser some return? I just do not understand it; it is crackpot—daft.

Mr. Byrne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question.

Andrew Mackinlay: What is the answer?

Mr. Byrne: The answer is that there is no European or other legal impediment to the proposal that we have introduced for the future of the Dartford crossing. My hon. Friend will know that it remains within the Government's power to regulate tolls on the crossing.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary do me a very great favour? Will he read an account of Britain after 12 years of Labour rule written in plain, simple English, shorn of the jargon with which his statement was laden? It is "Bog-Standard Britain" by Mr. Quentin Letts.

Mr. Byrne: Sometimes I am forced to read the words of Quentin Letts, but I tend to avoid it when I can.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend reflect on the exchange that took place earlier today about disability living allowance, and look at this as an opportunity to re-examine business processes and why we do things in a particular way? There are lots of areas in which we can make significant productivity gains by making delivery more customer-focused. DLA is a classic example, but the relationship between, for example the Department for Work and Pensions and housing benefit is another, and there are many others in which a more customer-focused approach would benefit not only the customer but the Treasury, too.

Mr. Byrne: My hon. Friend is right and, as I said, I am particularly grateful to Sir Michael Bichard and public servants across 65 local authorities and a number of constabularies and primary care trusts who are looking at how we can bring together the administrative services run by central and local government to eradicate exactly the kind of inefficiency to which my hon. Friend points. We will have more to say about how we take those findings forward in the Budget next year.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): I thank the Minister, both for the statement and for giving us early sight of it. Some of the measures are sensible, not least the ending of ring-fencing for council budgets. The Scottish Government have already done that. At its heart, though, this is £12 billion of additional cuts, some beginning next year, over and above the 10 years of austerity promised by Lord Mandelson. Given that even the CBI has argued that additional fiscal tightening should not take place until 2011-12, lest it risk a fragile recovery, what steps has the Minister taken to ensure that the cuts in the document do not lead to the weakening of recovery from recession?

Mr. Byrne: If we want to grow our economy in the years to come, we have to make sure that we have strong public services in this country that stand behind families who want to get on in life. The hon. Gentleman knows that if we want to raise standards in public services at the same time as halving our deficit, we must make sure that our economy grows and that we make the right decisions on public spending and on tax. That is a presentation that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will make to the House on Wednesday, but the hon. Gentleman will surely admit that if we want to raise standards and investment in front-line services, it is right to look for inefficiencies that we can cut at the centre of government, and today's plan sets out a way to do that.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend has decided to keep standards at the top of his agenda and to axe many of the targets and inspectorates that maintain those standards, but can he elaborate on how he expects consumers of monopoly suppliers who know no other standards to raise those standards? What role does he see for professional external scrutinisers in maintaining or raising standards?

Mr. Byrne: There are two ways in which we can exert greater popular pressure to push up standards in front-line services. The first thing that we can do is set out a range of guarantees to high-quality public services. That means, for example, the right to see a cancer specialist within two weeks if a specialist is worried that a patient has cancer, the right to a good local police team and the right to one-to-one tuition for a child who is falling behind at school. With those rights in place, it is much easier to judge whether public services are delivering for consumers. That is why, in today's Command Paper, we have set out steps to free up the kind of comparative information that allows people to see how services in their area are doing compared with others, and whether they are performing in a more efficient way than others.

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): Neither in the statement nor in the earlier urgent question has the Minister made it clear how much he will save on the NHS supercomputer. The NAO says that the Government have spent £3.6 billion already. Can he confirm that that figure from the NAO is accurate?

Mr. Byrne: I would need to check the date of the figure that was published by the NAO. The basic point is that, at a time when we are trying to drive standards up and the deficit down, in some parts of Government we will have to make difficult decisions about whether programmes that are in place are contributing enough to front-line care or whether they can be put off. There will often be difficult decisions. The decisions that we have set out in the Command Paper are difficult but doable.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): Will not the smarter state end up looking very stupid if we outsource, sell off or transfer to the private sector and then are ripped off down the line? Are there any functions from which the Government intend to withdraw entirely? Does my right hon. Friend worry, as I do, about the morale of those working in a public sector that is constantly denigrated and told that it is useless?

Mr. Byrne: I do not have quite the same apoplectic vision of public service reform as my hon. Friend. Sometimes there are efficiencies to be had through outsourcing certain services, particularly in finance, IT and so on. I make no apology for that. The prospectus that we set out this afternoon will be enthusiastically received by front-line public servants, not least because of its promise of greater freedom to innovate and do things in a different way locally.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not know whether the Chief Secretary has been watching too much of "Bargain Hunt", but it is clear that the Government are keen on selling off the family silver.

[Mr. Peter Bone]

His listed a raft of things that would be sold off, but he did not mention Urenco. Will that still be sold off?

Mr. Byrne: We will certainly explore options for commercialising our stakeholding in Urenco, yes.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, but I urge him to go a little further in respect of quangos. He suggests saving only £500 million by abolishing or rationalising 123 of them. May I ask him to give me an early Christmas present—less quango for Marris?

Mr. Byrne: I think I can promise that. The final report from the review of arm's length bodies will be published at the Budget next year. The 123 arm's length bodies that I set out this afternoon are merely an interim step.

Point of Order

4.29 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. During his remarks in response to me earlier, the Chief Secretary referred to the Opposition hiring certain former Government advisers to advise them. Would the right hon. Gentleman like to take this opportunity to make it clear that he understands that no money is changing hands in any of these transactions, and that anyone who has made the decision to advise the Opposition has done so because he believes that that is in the best interests of this country?

Mr. Speaker: The Chief Secretary may offer a brief reply if he wishes, but he is not under any obligation.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): I am happy to offer the clarification that that is my understanding. I spoke to Dr. Read last night and he made that point to me very clearly.

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful.

Energy Bill

Second Reading

4.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Edward Miliband): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Today is an appropriate day to discuss the Energy Bill—at the opening of the Copenhagen conference and before the ministerial meetings that will take place in its second week. Those talks are an essential part of the context of the Bill that we are debating, and in the past two weeks we have seen signs of progress from China, India and the United States. They have all put targets on the table, and we are determined to use our influence to get the best agreement that we can, consistent with the science. We are determined also to show the maximum ambition in our own plans, and that explains the Bill that we have brought before the House.

Given recent events, I should also like to say that we are here to debate a Bill that is driven in large part by the science of climate change. It is important to take this opportunity to restate briefly the case on the science, because it underlies today's debate. The science is not from politicians, but from scientists: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, whose work is based on 4,000 experts; the national academies of science of the G8 developed countries and the five leading developing countries; and, here at home, the Met Office, the Natural Environment Research Council and the Royal Society. All those organisations are clear that the science is unambiguous—that climate change is real and man-made.

Of course the science is not static, but we must not somehow suggest that robust and near universally accepted science is merely of equal validity to the views of a very small minority of people, many of whom are not scientists. Importantly, one chain of e-mails does not undo decades of climate science, and particular responsibility lies with Members of this House and, indeed, of the other place not to seek to sow doubt or to replace the view of the science with their prejudices.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Does the Minister share my concern that the media—some of the tabloid press, in particular—choose deliberately to misrepresent the science just to sell a few more papers?

Edward Miliband: I actually think that, by and large, members of the press, including the tabloid press, have during this year embraced the idea of climate change and the need to tackle it. However, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point: in this process, we rely partly on the press to make clear the burden of evidence and views and where they lie, and, indeed, the balance of views and where they lie. Anything that the press can do to help us to make that case is very important, because we are debating difficult decisions—and nobody should be under any illusion that they are not difficult. If people come away with the impression that the science is somehow not settled, or that there is an easy way out, we will face difficulties.

Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the validity of the arguments and the scientific case for the existence of climate change is completely undermined by people such as Lord Lawson and the Conservative M[illegible]ichard Helmer; and, that the Conservatives must do more to ensure that they align themselves with our policies and the policies that the British public want?

Edward Miliband: The truth is that we need as much of a consensus as we can get on these issues—from all parts of the House. That is very important, and that is why I emphasise the importance of us all showing responsibility, rather than setting ourselves up as scientists and somehow substituting for the views of the science. It is important that politicians act on the basis of the science, and that is what we seek to do.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talks about acting on the evidence of the science, but he knows that in the case of Heathrow airport, involving an important decision that will affect the environment, the only costed emissions were those of outgoing flights, not of incoming ones. How can he be serious about taking good decisions if his own Department does not get its maths right?

Edward Miliband: The hon. Lady has a long history of campaigning on this issue. I agree with her about the need to make decisions such as that on the third runway at Heathrow in the proper context. That is why we are the first Government in the world to say that we will stabilise aviation emissions at 2050 levels. Indeed, there will soon be a report from the independent Committee on Climate Change on that precise point.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The Select Committee on Science and Technology was in absolutely no doubt about the validity and strength of the case that climate change is happening and that it is the result of man's activity since the industrial revolution. Even if some of the science can be questioned, the consequences for the planet and mankind are so dire that the precautionary principle should be observed, and I congratulate the Government on taking that line.

Edward Miliband: The hon. Gentleman is completely right. The precautionary principle was emphasised by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker) in a debate that we had a few weeks ago. It is right that we should follow the precautionary principle in this process; in a way, that is an important part of the argument. However, in emphasising the precautionary principle we must not give a sense—I know that the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) is not doing this—that the science is not settled and that we would be better off being cautious. The science is clear and overwhelming, and the precautionary principle adds extra weight to that.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Whether one believes that emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere produce climate change is a big argument, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there are two other important reasons why we should not be burning fossil fuels? First, we are acidifying the sea almost beyond the point of no return. Secondly—I speak passionately as a chemist—producing energy from carbon fuels is a very inefficient process, and we need those carbon fuels as larders of chemicals for the generations of the future, so it is a sin to burn them.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge; indeed, much greater than mine. My chemistry is probably as bad as my brother's physics in terms of his performance at school. My hon. Friend is completely right about that point and about ocean acidification, which is a serious issue that lots of oceanographers and others are very concerned about.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): The Energy Secretary is clear that he is persuaded by the science and that the scientific evidence is overwhelming, which is the view of those on the Liberal Democrat Benches and on the Conservative Front Bench. Can he confirm that the logic of that is that the UK Government, this week and next, on their own and with the European Union, will go for the toughest, strongest, clearest binding agreement so that we can not only follow the precautionary principle but remember that we are going in to bat for a world where countries such as Bangladesh and the Maldives have the chance of a future, not just countries such as ours which caused the bulk of the problem in the first place?

Edward Miliband: I think I can say yes to that intervention. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need the toughest and most ambitious agreement possible and the shortest track to a legally binding treaty.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman gave his maiden speech just after I gave mine; I congratulate him on his epic rise to fame on the Front Benches.

Taking up the issue of fossil fuels, we now know that nuclear capacity is running out and that we are running out of oil and gas. What have this Government done for the past 10 years? It is as though the Secretary of State is the boy scout who has turned up late for camp and finally realised that he was responsible for lighting the fire, so everybody will get very cold and angry. Have we not just had a wasted decade?

Edward Miliband: If we are talking about responsibility, I have to say that the alarmism that Opposition Front Benchers have engaged in on these issues is of no help at all. The answer to the hon. Gentleman is that we have very clear plans, as I will explain, on renewables, where we are now the leader in offshore wind, on nuclear power—opposed tooth and nail by the Opposition, whose leader said that it was a last resort—and on clean coal.

Mr. Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I very much agree with what the Secretary of State has said, but even if we get an agreement at Copenhagen, there is still the problem of having to explain to people what the figures actually mean. If we are talking about 80 per cent. reductions, that will mean massive changes in our economy. I am not convinced that the people of this country really understand what it means as yet.

Edward Miliband: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, as I said at the weekend, there is a mountain to climb and a huge amount to do to explain to people the scale of the changes that we are making, such as 10,000 wind turbines between now and 2020, more nuclear power stations and the clean coal technology that I have talked about—and that is just in the energy sector. Those are big changes, and I will not pretend that they are not.

The central response to the challenge of the science must be for the Government to understand their role in making the low-carbon transition happen. The truth underlying the Bill is that markets left to their own devices do not put a price on carbon emissions and will not bring forward the investment and industrial policy that we need, nor will they provide the right energy mix for the future. Our low-carbon transition plan, which was published in the summer and widely welcomed, sets out sector by sector what needs to change to meet our commitment to a 34 per cent. reduction by 2020. I believe that we are the first country in the world to do that. It builds on the fact, which Opposition Members often forget, that we are one of the few countries to have met and exceeded our Kyoto targets, with greenhouse gas emissions 21 per cent. below 1990 levels.

Previous legislation, including the Climate Change Act 2008, provides us with many of the powers that we need. In the Bill, which is relatively short because of the length of the Session, we provide for legislation on three particular matters that are central to the task that we face. First, to clean up our energy supplies, it legislates for a levy to provide unprecedented investment in clean coal. Secondly, to improve the deal for consumers, it strengthens the power of the regulator and ensures that it must be proactive for the consumer. Thirdly, to deliver fairness, we are introducing compulsory cut-price energy for the most vulnerable customers.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that carbon capture and storage is important for the UK, because it will give flexibility to the energy mix, but even more important for the world? Exporting post-combustion technology will allow the bolt-on application that will help to reduce carbon dioxide throughout the world and help us to reach the 2050 targets?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have said that there will be up to four carbon capture and storage projects, up to two of which will be post-combustion and up to two pre-combustion. That is not just for domestic reasons but for the international reasons that he mentions.

My hon. Friend's comments take me to one of the central purposes of the Bill, which is to provide for a levy for clean coal technology. In total, the new levy will provide up to £9.5 billion over the coming two decades. It is fair to say that in a world of tight resources, it must be right to provide a dedicated stream of funding for clean coal and CCS. It is the largest single investment in CCS by any country in the world, including the United States. Let me be clear about the timetable, which has been raised with us: if the measure is passed, the new levy will come into force in 2011. Next year, before its introduction, we will launch a competition for the up to three additional projects that will benefit from it, alongside the current competition. We need to move quickly on CCS, that is what we will do, in support of our central aim to demonstrate CCS and make it ready for widespread deployment by 2020.

The importance of that is that it is right not just for our environment but for our economy. As many hon. Members know, the CCS industry could provide Britain

with up to 60,000 jobs by 2030. Furthermore, CCS can be good for our long-term energy security, as my hon. Friend has pointed out on a number of occasions, because it will give us greater diversity in our energy sources. As we develop it and make it viable, there will be future steps to ensure that it can be applied to gas-fired power stations as well.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentions consumers, so is there not now a compelling case for him to use his powers to refer the big six energy companies and the relationship between consumers and wholesale prices to the Competition Commission—that is supported by Consumer Focus, the statutory consumer body—given that the commission alone has the powers to break down barriers to entry to the market and that the enhanced powers for Ofgem in the Bill will not come fully into effect until 2011?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend has thought deeply about this issue and we have discussed it. The Competition Commission remains a potential last resort, which I still consider it to be. Let me explain why. For a Competition Commission inquiry, we are looking at one to two years, and further remedies will take longer. The commission looked into the liquefied petroleum gas market, but it was five years between the initial investigation and the final remedies being introduced—not that I hold the commission responsible for that.

However, the intent behind my hon. Friend's question is right in the sense that we have cause for concern, including about what Ofgem has shown today, but the Government need to think about a policy response, and we have work going on around the road map for low carbon that will be published in the spring. It is better to look at policy options—Ofgem will indeed have a report out early in the new year—rather than at a lengthy Competition Commission investigation.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned in passing that CCS would be rolled out to gas-fired power stations as well. Nothing in the Bill does that, so how will that step be taken?

Edward Miliband: I think the urgency is to make coal carbon capture work—CCS for gas is farther down the road. We know that coal-fired power stations have approximately double the emissions of gas-fired power stations. The North sea industry, for which the hon. Gentleman campaigns vigorously, can play a crucial role in that area of CCS—indeed, I enjoyed a recent visit to Aberdeen.

That takes me to the second part of my remarks, which is about the consumer. I welcome the fact that in the past year, we have seen an improvement in certain areas; for example, for prepayment retail customers, which has long been campaigned for by hon. Members. A year ago, people on prepayment meters paid £41 more for their energy than standard credit customers; today, that differential has been effectively eliminated.

However, there is a lot further to go, as I said in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan), and the Bill provides for three important changes in regulation. Central to the Bill is reforming the duties of Ofgem. It is wrong to think that competition alone can protect the consumer, so the Bill makes it clear that Ofgem must use all the measures at its disposal, not just competition. It is wrong that generating companies can unfairly exploit market power to overcharge consumers, so we are responding to a request—such a request was turned down some years ago by the Competition Commission—to provide Ofgem with new sanctions against market power exploitation in the generation market. It is also wrong that companies can escape penalty if abuse is not discovered for more than a year. To ensure that the enforcement regime provides an effective deterrent, the Bill extends the time limit within which Ofgem can impose penalties for licence breaches from 12 months to five years. That suite of new powers significantly strengthens the powers of the regulator to ensure that the costs of energy are fairer.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): As the Secretary of State is going to change Ofgem's powers and duties, has he considered doing so in relation to new grid transmission lines? He will be aware of a new proposal by National Grid for a high-voltage line across the Somerset levels. Only two options have been proposed, but a sub-marine option up the Bristol channel was excluded even before consultation began. If he is considering making changes, will he put additional obligations on National Grid to consider other options for that type of environmental project?

Edward Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman raises a local issue that is of some importance, but I confess that I do not know the details. On the question of grid access, which is a significant and wider problem, he will perhaps be aware that I exercise powers—under the last Energy Bill we had, in the summer—to set the terms of grid access, which has been a perennial problem in relation to renewables. We pledge that that process will be completed by the summer of 2010, and we are on track to do that. On the local issue, he may wish to write to me or one of my colleagues and we will look into it.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to say that there are some important issues connected with being fair to consumers given some of the monopolistic powers of the energy generators. Why has he rejected the suggestion of a legal requirement for gas storage, as is the case in other European countries? Some people believe that that allows those countries' markets to behave in a fairer way towards consumers, whereas our market, which has such a limited supply of gas storage, has enabled some of the suppliers to behave poorly.

Edward Miliband: We do need more gas storage, and the hon. Lady, as a member of the Select Committee, has expertise in these matters. The reason we are worried about the proposal that she recommends—we will shortly respond to the recommendations of the Wicks review, which looked at some of these issues—is the danger that it could take the pressure off the companies in terms of what they need to do to build more gas storage. If we substitute our judgment in these matters for their judgment about what is necessary, the danger is that we increase costs to consumers and inhibit future plans for gas storage.

[Edward Miliband]

The third issue is the question of vulnerable consumers, which is very important to hon. Members. As well as strengthening general powers of regulation, the Energy Bill will do more for vulnerable consumers. We need to help those most in need through higher incomes, energy efficiency and prices. That is why we have introduced and increased the winter fuel payment and brought in higher cold weather payments. Since 2002, 6 million homes have received loft or cavity wall insulation, and we are on the way to loft and cavity wall insulation for all houses where it can work by 2015. But we need to go further. Today we are announcing pay-as-you-save pilots in five parts of the country to test out a comprehensive, whole-house approach to energy efficiency, supported by finance, as is necessary to make it happen. This is on the way to whole-house refurbishment, beyond loft and cavity wall improvements, for 7 million homes by 2020 and for all by 2030. This will help save money for consumers.

But we also need action on tariffs. The current voluntary agreement on social assistance with energy companies has already helped more than 1 million customer accounts. However, the powers in the Bill will mean that rather than a voluntary agreement, there is a compulsory money-off energy deal for vulnerable customers. We will increase the total amount of help, up from the level of £150 million in the final year of the current voluntary agreement. We want the new system to ensure that older, poorer pensioners in particular receive assistance with their energy bills and we will set out more detailed plans in the coming weeks.

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): How will that scheme be paid for? Will it be the taxpayer who ultimately pays or will the companies be expected to use some of their profits to pay for it?

Edward Miliband: As for many of these levies, the cost will be spread across other bill payers. Alongside that, we need the tough regulation that I am talking about, which bears down on prices as much as possible. It is right that we take action to help the most vulnerable consumers in our society, and a voluntary agreement is inadequate in the current circumstances. We will have more to say about that in the coming weeks.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Edward Miliband: I have been generous in giving way, but I will give way to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): I welcome the announcement about mandatory social tariffs. The Secretary of State said that the poorest pensioners will benefit, but will he look at the case of people with long-term chronic illnesses and, in particular, the campaign run by Macmillan for people with cancer?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend asks about the debate that my hon. Friend the Minister of State is looking forward to in Committee about the groups that should be helped by the social tariffs. There are lots of strong cases to be made, but the point is that there is a balance to be struck. Because the costs are spread across all consumers, as I said in response to an earlier intervention, we need to strike the right balance between the groups that are helped and how targeted the measures are.

Nick Ainger (Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) referred to the sectors that are not covered by the social tariff. My right hon. Friend said that the issue would be debated in Committee, but would he like to comment now on the fact that although approximately 4 million-plus consumers are not on the gas network, but are instead dependent on liquefied petroleum gas and heating oil, they do not qualify for any social tariff? That is a genuine issue.

Edward Miliband: That is something that many hon. Members have campaigned on. I refer to my earlier answer. There was a Competition Commission inquiry into that issue which lasted five years and was designed to bring some relief. That is a warning to us all as we advocate a Competition Commission response to other energy issues. We are looking at measures to help those groups of consumers through Warm Front and other schemes, although I recognise the case that my hon. Friend makes.

As I approach the end of my speech, let me say, as I always say on these occasions, that we want as much of an all-party consensus as possible. Unfortunately, we have no clarity about where those on the Conservative Opposition Front Bench stand on the measures. When we debated the Gracious Speech, I posed five questions to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), including about the Bill, but I am afraid that he gave satisfactory answers to none of them. However, I am a fair-minded person and I believe in second chances, even for members of the Conservative party—indeed, he was not always a member of the Conservative party, so perhaps he deserves a special offer.

Today the hon. Gentleman gets the chance of a resit on the questions that I asked him previously. I shall narrow those questions down, but if he is to show that the Conservative party offers more than greenwash on such matters, he must show that he can answer some basic questions. First, does he support the CCS levy that we have put forward? We say that it will provide unprecedented investment in clean coal. He says that he will use money that is already accounted for in the Government's tax and spending plans. He says that revenues from the EU emissions trading scheme can get him 5 GW of new coal, but, as we might expect, that is a policy about image and not substance, and it would damage our ability to tackle climate change.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman needs to answer the question that was posed brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) last time about his £150 billion scheme for energy efficiency. He says that it will cost no public money, whereas his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) has said—*[Interruption.]* I know that the Opposition do not like to hear about their own policies, but they should be able to answer some basic questions. The hon. Gentleman said:

"The policy should be carried out and supported by loan guarantees from the Government to ensure that the energy companies can do it. That is how the task is done elsewhere."—[*Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee*, 13 July 2009; c. 9.]

It would be good to hear today how those loan guarantees will be paid for, because the hon. Gentleman's colleague has said that loan guarantees are required.

Thirdly, there is the wider question of Europe, which I also posed last time. Frankly, again we see the Opposition hanging round with the wrong crowd in Europe.

Mr. Ellwood: Read out the list then.

Edward Miliband: I can read out the list if the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* He says that he is getting bored with it, but it is very relevant because action in Europe is essential to the Bill and to tackling climate change, yet the majority of the Conservative party's European partners voted against the motion that was put forward in last week's Copenhagen debate.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): On the subject of supporting European initiatives on energy, do the Government support the European super-grid yet?

Edward Miliband: We do support the European super-grid, which we think is an important idea.

We deserve answers from the Opposition today, not just the usual hot air. They need to come forward with some genuine policies rather than just image. Tackling climate change, protecting our energy security and protecting consumers all require significant change. The Energy Bill is key to making those changes and it deserves the support of all Members. I commend it to the House.

5 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I have respect for the Secretary of State but I have to say that, with every speech that he makes, he sounds more like a member of the Opposition than a Secretary of State. He seems to be practising. The decisions on climate change and energy policy are so far reaching that the rest of the country looks to us to establish some common ground and speed things up, rather than make petty points. I will answer all the questions that he asked—I have no problem with that—but anyone looking at the Bill cannot help but be disappointed at this missed opportunity.

This is an anaemic Bill that lacks energy, even though it calls itself an Energy Bill. The Secretary of State has had a year in post in which to think about the issues and to reflect on and bring forward legislation. Who knows what will happen after the election? He might still be in post, he might be in a different post, or he might be in opposition. This was therefore perhaps his one and only opportunity to put on the statute book a Bill that could have lived up to the ideals that he no doubt shares, and that could have made a difference and provided a legacy of which he could be proud. The problems that we face are mountainous, and we deserve boldness in response.

I do not want to cast blame at this stage; there will be other occasions on which we can do that. The Secretary of State and I came into the House at the same time and, whatever his contribution might have been to our national economic success when he was chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, he was not in charge of energy policy at the time, so we cannot hold him personally responsible for that.

We can, however, agree on what the problems are. There are five in particular. We are facing power cuts and an energy crunch by 2017—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says that that is rubbish, but he wrote an article entitled "We must work together to keep the lights on". Why would he write such a thing if he did not think that there was a risk of that happening?

Mr. Ellwood: Labour's lights.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is correct. In that article, the Secretary of State said that we needed to work together to keep the lights on. Great! I agree, but where are the measures to do that in the Bill? There is not one single such measure.

Miss Kirkbride: As part of the evidence that my hon. Friend is putting forward to the Secretary of State, he might refer to that given to the Select Committee last week by Alistair Buchanan, the chief executive of Ofgem, who clearly described the worrying scenario of the lights going off in the middle of the next decade. He is the man in charge of this policy.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is quite right. I am surprised that the Secretary of State has not taken that evidence into account. In fact, Mr. Buchanan went on to say:

> "The headline fact is that Britain is the single most exposed country among the big players in Europe".

That is what the Secretary of State's regulator says. I thought that this problem was something on which we could agree, and that the Bill might contain measures to solve it, yet it contains none.

The second threat was mentioned earlier. The fact is that during the years ahead we will rely more and more on imported gas. For understandable reasons, North sea oil and gas supplies have peaked and are in decline. Other countries facing this situation have adequate storage capacity. The French have 120 days' supply and the Germans have 99 days, yet we have only 15 days. Where is the proposal in the Bill to increase our level of gas storage?

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) asked the Secretary of State a question on storage, and he gave a completely incoherent answer. He said that to advance the proposition that we should have the kind of storage on which other countries insist would somehow put off companies from investing. I do not understand what he meant by that. Perhaps the Minister of State will make a better job of explaining it when she winds up the debate.

Another problem is our pitiful progress on renewables. I know that the Secretary of State believes in renewables, as do I, and we want to accelerate progress. We agree that wind farms and other renewables projects tend to get bogged down in acrimonious planning disputes. He thinks that we should have more renewables projects, and so do I, but his approach is to go round the country shouting at people for opposing wind farms, like Lady Catherine de Bourgh visiting a disobedient relative to tick them off. But where is the policy in the Bill to provide incentives for local communities to take on such projects?

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman correctly identifies the need for clarity in the planning system, and the need to speed up that system. Will he therefore support our proposals to do precisely that?

Greg Clark: We share a view about the need to speed up the planning process, and we think that the powers of the Infrastructure Planning Commission are absolutely right. It is also right that what are essentially national matters are decided nationally through planning statements. We have two points of difference, and we would amend the proposals on the IPC. First, we think such decisions should be accountable: the final decision should be taken by a Secretary of State who is accountable to this House rather than by some unelected official. We think it is right that people should be able to hold someone to account, but under our proposals there would be the same time limits and the same secretariat to advise, and the same process would apply, so it would be at least as quick, if not quicker, than under the Government's proposal.

Secondly, we think that the planning statements that are read out to the House—starting with the nuclear one, in which I know the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) is as keenly interested as I am—are so important that they should be proofed against the inevitable legal challenges through judicial review that will be made against them. By subjecting them to a positive vote, the will of this House that the statements represent public policy will be expressed. If these statements are merely the utterances of a set of officials whose democratic legitimacy has not been established, that might be a problem that causes further delays. Therefore, we are at one with the hon. Gentleman in wanting these planning obstacles to be removed, and our amendments to the Government's proposals will speed that up.

Nigel Griffiths: Does the hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that his Front-Bench colleague, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) opposes all onshore wind farms, which is rather typical of the Conservative position?

Greg Clark: Once again, I had hoped that we would seek to achieve unity on these issues. *[Interruption.]* When my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) made that comment, he said that he was speaking in a personal capacity and fully respected the Front-Bench viewpoint. The party in government goes around the country telling people that they are immoral to raise even a qualm about a wind farm in their area, but it has no policy response to it. If the Secretary of State has any policy suggestions, why do they not appear in this Energy Bill? The Bill is designed to solve a problem that the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths) seems to think exists—but the Secretary of State has no solution. *[Interruption.]*

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): My hon. Friend certainly does not need helping out; I think that the Minister does. The Bill is very much a missed opportunity for planning. There is to be no obligation placed on large pieces of infrastructure—in my constituency, for example, 3.5 million square feet of roof space is not being used in any way, shape or form—to incorporate green initiatives, green energy or any form of biodiversity to help support it.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the point that I am making: this Bill is a colossal missed opportunity. If the Government think that there is a problem—we agree that there is—why do they not bring forward solutions? We have said that we need to cut people in to the benefits of renewable technologies, but nothing in the Bill addresses that.

Edward Miliband: I am astonished by the hon. Gentleman's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths). Since the hon. Gentleman aspires to be in government, how does he think a potential Government might function when the shadow Business Secretary, who is supposed to be an ally when it comes to wind farms, says:

"My view is that those few wild and open... spaces that we have left in Britain should not be used for wind turbines"?

Will that strengthen or weaken a potential Government when it comes to delivering on the renewables agenda?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman is speaking from his experience of the type of mind control that goes on in the Labour Government. We Conservatives are perfectly relaxed to have discussions about these things, knowing that we have strong policies that will make a difference. It is one reason why the country is getting a bit fed up with the government by pager that we get from Labour.

Martin Horwood *rose—*

Greg Clark: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but then make some progress.

Martin Horwood: I am now thoroughly confused about the Conservative Front-Bench position on wind farms. Would the hon. Gentleman have supported the private Member's Bill recently promoted by his hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff), which sought to drive a coach and horses through wind power in this country? What is the Conservative position on such initiatives?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, private Members' Bills are not taken up by those on the Front Bench, but my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) made an interesting point, and if it is relevant, I am sure that it can be taken up in the discussions on renewable energy that the Minister will be promoting.

The Bill contains no strategy to deal with fuel poverty, one of the most pressing issues facing the country. Yes, it gives Ministers reserve powers to intervene, but where is the commitment to the only sustainable way in which to reduce fuel poverty—improved home energy efficiency? That is completely absent from the Bill, although it is surely beyond politics and is something that we should get on with. When people's fuel bills are £1,200 a year and more, and they can save money and carbon dioxide and create jobs by improving insulation, how can a serious Energy Bill possibly be completely silent on the issue? It beggars belief.

At a time when we need £200 billion of investment in new generating capacity, we know that that investment is not being made. That is partly because people are so uncertain about the policy environment, including the

price of carbon, which has been low and very volatile. Where are the measures in the Bill providing for a more stable carbon pricing regime?

There is a better way. This was the moment at which the whole House could have united—as we did when we discussed the Climate Change Bill—in devising an ambitious, progressive solution to a crisis that commands all our attention. The Bill, however, contains nothing to close the energy gap, nothing to secure our gas supplies, nothing to accelerate renewables, nothing to improve energy efficiency at home, and nothing to address the price of carbon. What a disappointment it is. I am sorry if the Secretary of State has been distracted, whether by writing the manifesto or by the silly dividing-line nonsense that he tried earlier, when he should have been applying himself to turning his policy thoughts into proposals in the Bill.

Let me now deal with the Bill's contents, slight though they are. Given the scale of the challenges, it is a pitiful Bill, and not even a Bill that produces any action today. In the case of each of its three components—carbon capture and storage, Ofgem, and social tariffs—it merely enables Ministers to take powers that they cannot begin to implement without new statutory instruments in a new Parliament, probably following further consultations. Where is the ambition and the urgency that we require from the Secretary of State? Of the 37 clauses in the Bill, 34 are enabling, consequential or technical; only three make actual changes to the way in which things work at present.

Let me give my response to the three measures that the Bill does contain. It seems that we do agree on the importance of carbon capture and storage, but not on its urgency. Britain is ideally placed to be in the vanguard of the deployment of carbon capture and storage. We have depleted gas wells and saline aquifers in the North sea. We have along our coastline some of the industries that can lead the world in this regard: processing industries and marine engineering businesses. We have some of the best research establishments in the world, and we should be leading the world. It is important that we do, because carbon capture and storage corresponds to the experience curve: the sooner we get on with it, the more we can establish a lead. There is no great scientific breakthrough for which people are waiting.

Given that the present Prime Minister announced plans to support carbon capture and storage in his 2006 Budget, why did the Government wait a further 18 months before launching a competition to deliver a single carbon capture and storage plan? It took until November 2007 for them to do that. More than two years have passed, and we still do not have a winner. Meanwhile, the chance for Britain to lead the world is slipping away. China, Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway and Belgium have all used that delay to overtake Britain.

The Bill proposes a new levy on electricity to pay for carbon capture and storage. The first question to be asked is why we have had to wait for a Bill that cannot possibly receive Royal Assent until 2010 to pay for a scheme that was first mooted in 2006. If it needs this levy, why was it not in the 2006, the 2007 or the 2008 Queen's Speech? We believe that, when it came to payment, the first choice should have been the revenues from the European Union emissions trading scheme. The Secretary of State tells me that they have been spent, although they do not begin to accrue in this phase until 2012. If they have indeed been spent, there must be an assumption of the amount that they were going to raise. Let me ask the Secretary of State now what that estimate is, and where it appears in the Red Book. I am happy to give way to him. [Hon. Members: "No answer."] This is typical Labour party economics: the money has been spent on something that is completely invisible and the Secretary of State cannot even find it in the Red Book. No wonder we are in the mess we are in.

Mr. Jamie Reed *rose—*

Greg Clark: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he can provide an explanation for the missing billions of pounds.

Mr. Reed: In time. Can the hon. Gentleman confirm whether a future Conservative Government would support a Government subsidy for CCS, and if so, up to what level—and would he also make the same benefits available to the nuclear industry? The answer to that question will be listened to very keenly by international and domestic investors in this country.

Greg Clark: Of course we would support a subsidy for CCS; that is what we have been urging on the Government. The Secretary of State says he has spent the money, although he is unable to say how much he has spent or what it has been spent on. On nuclear, we have said that it is a mature technology, and should not be given a specific subsidy. I do not think there is any difference between us on that.

If the Secretary of State can convince us that the money has, indeed, been spent, it may be the case that the levy is what we will have to fall back on. I still do not think, however, that he can get away with saying that this money has been spent on something the Government cannot account for. *[Interruption.]* So far, it is impossible to tell what the impact of the levy will be, because, as the Secretary of State has just said from a sedentary position, he is merely proposing powers to charge a levy in the future.

If there were to be a levy, however, would that not offer the Secretary of State an opportunity to provide a clearer price for carbon, which is much needed? Why should suppliers of electricity from renewables, for example, have to pay a levy to support the capture of carbon when they do not generate any carbon dioxide in their production of electricity? Should not the "polluter pays" principle be followed, so that the levy is incurred in proportion to the CO_2 emissions generated by each supplier? The Secretary of State might like to consider that, since he has clearly not designed his levy properly yet.

Why are the Government restricting themselves to the same approach that they took in respect of the climate change levy: a stealth tax, which did not do what was described on the tin, as it were, because it had nothing at all to do with climate change? If the Government are serious about forbidding CO_2 emissions from new coal power stations, why do they not specify—as we have said we would—an emissions performance standard

[Greg Clark]

so that no coal-generating plant can be more polluting than the most efficient combined cycle gas turbine station? That must be a totem of their seriousness in this matter.

If we are to have investment in CCS, in the hope that it will work and be demonstrated successfully, why will the Government not ensure that the pipelines for the demonstration plants are built oversize so that they can be made use of by future CCS plants, rather than be fully exhausted from day one?

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): How much oversized should the pipelines be?

Greg Clark: They should be adequate for the potential in their area. The Secretary of State has talked about having clusters for CCS. It is possible to make an assessment of how many such future plants might be able to make use of the pipelines. It is wrong to spend public money on building pipelines that will be adequate only for the demonstration plant and then to have to repeat installation if the process is successful. That is a bonkers approach; it is a waste of public money.

Mr. Anderson: In Select Committee discussions it was said that, if this were a road, it would be either a B road or a motorway. They are hugely different. Has the hon. Gentleman costed his proposal?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is asking me questions that presuppose that I will be in office. I am saying, assuming that this project works and looking to the future, that it will be rather ridiculous if the Public Accounts Committee holds an inquiry in several years and asks why on earth the Secretary of State consented to spending public money on building a pipeline network that was not adequate for the coal plants that he hoped would be able to access it in future. That is a waste. Will the Secretary of State make clear the criteria for the clusters of CCS that have been promised—but which are mysteriously absent from the Bill? Many parts of the country are keenly awaiting the answer to that.

In particular, with the devastating closure—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State should listen to this, because thousands of jobs are affected on Teesside. The people on Teesside, who have lost 1,700 jobs in the last week with the closure of the Corus plant, could benefit if Teesside became a CCS cluster. Can he or the Minister, in the winding-up speech, say anything about whether Teesside can count on being a contender for the cluster and when he will make the decision? I am disappointed that he does not find the situation on Teesside sufficiently meritorious for him even to listen to it. In the interests of giving the Bill and the levy mechanism proper scrutiny, will the Secretary of State commit to publishing in draft form the regulations that he proposes to make before the Bill goes into Committee?

The second part of the Bill creates a framework for obliging energy suppliers to provide social pricing for vulnerable customers.

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North) (Lab): I have listened very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has said about the critical issue of CCS, and he has talked about urgency. What would a future Government do that is not being proposed by the Secretary of State? I am not clear about that and I am not clear at all whether or not he supports the levy.

Greg Clark: Of course we will support the levy, if it indeed turns out that the funds from the emissions trading scheme have been exhausted. The detail of the levy requires scrutiny, which is why I have asked the Secretary of State to publish the regulations before the Bill goes into Committee so that we can ensure that there are no perverse consequences.

Mr. Ellwood: Has my hon. Friend noticed that the Bill is so slim and small that we have now lost interest in it almost in its entirety and have moved over to discussing Tory policy? That is all very well, but it is a waste of the time in which we are supposed to be focusing on the Bill. Does he agree that one thing that could have been [illegible] in the Bill, considering the threat that is now imposed on us, is what would happen if the lights went out? Should we not be considering an emergency plan in case we do not have power for Britain in the future?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is quite right. This should have been a Bill that enjoyed cross-party support for keeping the lights on. The Secretary of State said that we need to work together to keep the lights on, but he seems to have shrunk from an important opportunity to do that.

When average bills for domestic fuel are £1,200, high energy prices are a desperate problem for many families struggling with the consequences of the recession—especially now. There is an unsatisfactory delay in the publication of the fuel poverty statistics. As the Secretary of State knows, the last available figures, which were published in October, are for 2007 and show that 4 million households spent more than 10 per cent. of their income on energy bills. Since then energy prices have risen still further—domestic gas prices have doubled since 2004—and unemployment has risen. To use the Government's projections, it is thought that 6 million households—one family in every four—are in fuel poverty.

We desperately need a strategy to address fuel poverty, but the Bill does not provide one. Again, it does not even set out the Government's plans; it merely hands over another batch of regulation-making powers to the Secretary of State to be used in the future. So, if the Bill is passed into law, only then will the Government come up with detailed proposals. No doubt Ministers will want to consult on them, too, before laying a draft order before Parliament. Not only is that the very opposite of the urgency that is so badly needed, but, in all likelihood, vulnerable households will be lucky if they see a benefit by next winter, let alone this winter.

A serious fuel poverty strategy, as everyone in the House knows, must be based on tackling the cause, not just the symptoms. Our housing stock is appallingly inefficient and yet the Government's approach to energy efficiency, which saves everyone money, is to ration it. The Government's approach is that we should ration energy efficiency improvements. The funding that is

available through Warm Front, for example, is, as we discovered from the Under-Secretary, being cut by £15 million from the next financial year.

Earlier, the Secretary of State briefly skated over his pay-as-you-save scheme. That is not surprising, because it amounts to an exercise in piloting an approach in 500 homes—only 500 homes, when we have a problem on such a scale. This must be the biggest and most gaping hole in the strategy.

Paddy Tipping: As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman would make available a loan of £6,500 for every house to be insulated. That is a big programme with a big cost. What will the cost be, at a time when his colleagues are talking about reducing spending significantly, moving from a big-state approach—and this is it—to a small-state approach?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has asked me that question, because it allows me to explain once more that not all investment is public investment. It is possible, especially when there are savings to be made, for people to bring about those savings and, given that the savings will exceed the costs, to pay for the scheme through those means. We will allow every household in the country up to £6,500 in approved energy efficiency insulations, and the system will be conditional on money being saved on their bills during the payback time. That is a win-win situation.

Let me refer the Secretary of State to his own words about his pay-as-you-save schemes. He is having pilots for 500 homes, but I do not know why if he does not think that they will work. He has said that the pilots

"will give households the opportunity to invest in energy efficiency…in their homes with no upfront cost. Householders will make repayments spread over a long enough period so that repayments are lower than their predicted energy bill savings, meaning financial and carbon savings are made from day one."

That is his press release from today. I do not know whether he has read his own press release, but it mentions that the limit of his ambition is 500 homes.

Edward Miliband: The difference between me and the hon. Gentleman is that I recognise that this proposal will have a cost: we are providing £4 million to make those pilots possible. This comes back to image versus substance. He wants to claim that he can give £6,500 to every household in the country, costing up to £180 billion, and that it will cost no public money. That is clearly a con.

Greg Clark: I regret allowing the right hon. Gentleman to deliver such a poor response. The difference between us is a lack of ambition. Every household in the country could benefit from energy efficiency improvements, but the limit of his ambition is to treat 500 homes. How can he introduce a Bill with such poor potential for success?

Let me address the third aspect of the Bill—the changes that it makes to the regulation of gas and electricity markets. We support in principle the clarification of Ofgem's objective and the clear role that is being given to enhancing energy security and pursuing our low-carbon obligations. We also support the extension of the time limit in which Ofgem can impose penalties for breaches of licence conditions. However, we need to be clear about the respective roles of the Government and the regulator. Ministers should make policy decisions and the regulator should execute them. The changes are necessary in so far as they allow Ofgem to implement decisions that are made or promoted by Ministers on grounds such as energy security. However, in the past 12 years—and for the past 15 Energy Ministers—there has been a policy vacuum, the solution to which should not be to look to unelected bodies to proliferate policy. Instead, they should implement policy that has been determined by Ministers. I hope that that is what the Secretary of State has in mind with these changes.

Once again, the other two elements in this part of the Bill are simply enabling clauses, and they fail to grasp the urgency of the situation. A year ago, I told the Secretary of State that he should ask for an immediate Competition Commission investigation into the relationship between wholesale and retail energy prices. Initially, his response—I think it was last November, but he will correct me if I am wrong—was to summon the energy companies in to growl at them in some fierce way, but he has proved to be a paper tiger, because nothing has happened and he has done absolutely nothing to protect consumers' interests. Ofgem has today published a report that says that

"customer bill increases have consistently outweighed cost increases"

this is in relation to the wholesale price cost of gas—

since July 2008".

So, since July 2008, customer bill increases have consistently outweighed cost increases. On present trends, Ofgem expects customers to be losing £17 a month by September 2010, which will make a lot of difference to people's household bills. That should not come as a surprise to the Secretary of State because his own quango, Consumer Focus, told him last June that every household was then paying £74 a year too much. A swift, forensic investigation is needed to settle the matter once and for all. It is in no one's interests—neither those of the energy companies nor those of consumers—to have such a point of contention.

The Secretary of State's response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) on the matter was to say that he would examine the policy options in the spring. Meanwhile, we are approaching a winter in which, if we consider the figures from last winter, people will die because they feel unable to afford to keep the heating on to get them through. The matter has an urgency that I commend to the Secretary of State. I hope that he will think again rather than raising his eyes about a problem that is very real to our constituents.

Although we are, of course, content for the Bill to go into Committee, where we will try to strengthen it and remedy its deficiencies, it is a wasted opportunity. It could have taken urgent steps to keep the lights on, cut CO_2 emissions and create jobs. It would then have had broad-based support.

First, the Bill should include a green deal to give all households the energy efficiency improvements they need. Secondly, it should have an emissions performance standard to require all newly built electricity generation to cut emissions. Thirdly, it should include a requirement for gas storage to get us through the winter. Fourthly, it should provide for reform of the climate change levy to make it distinguish between high and low-carbon sources of energy. Fifthly, it should contain measures to require energy companies to say exactly what would have been saved on a cheaper tariff had a customer had access to it, and how to switch to that tariff.

[Greg Clark]

Sixthly, the Bill should have real incentives to allow communities that host wind farms to reap some of the rewards. Seventhly, it should provide for action to ensure that smart meters are fitted in every home, not by 2021—the Government's plan—but by 2017 at the latest. Eighthly, it should require immediate deployment of carbon capture and storage, with a network of pipes big enough for future use, not just for the proposed demonstrations. Ninthly, it should require the national grid to extend its network out to sea to harness the offshore wind, wave and marine energy that is available there. Tenthly, it should include the opportunity for Parliament to vote on the planning statements to ensure that there can be no further hold-ups in our nuclear programme.

The Secretary of State and the House could have been proud of such a measure—a Bill to keep the lights on, cut CO_2 and boost the economy. Had the Secretary of State possessed such boldness and ambition, he would attract the admiration of the House and the country. Instead, it will fall to a Conservative Government to take the decisive action that Britain needs.

5.32 pm

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): It is perhaps a coincidence that Second Reading takes place on the opening day of the climate change conference in Copenhagen, which Lord Stern described as perhaps the most significant international conference since the end of the second world war. Britain will show leadership at the conference. There may well be difficulties, but I hope that, at the end, we will get some sort of political agreement that can be translated into action.

It is important to recognise that the Bill's provisions link with the Copenhagen discussions. As has been said, the measure is modest, with 37 clauses and three subject areas. However, we all need to recognise the enormous challenge before us, and the big challenge of Copenhagen is to ensure that we move to having a robust and stable carbon price in future. Ofgem described the new investment required in the generating industry as being between £95 billion and £200 billion by 2020. It is interesting that Opposition Members have said nothing about nuclear power today. Is it still an option of last resort? Do they accept Zac Goldsmith's comment that the Tory policy is "No to nuclear power"? Where do they stand on nuclear power in their priorities for the future?

Greg Clark: I am delighted to have the opportunity to correct the hon. Gentleman. He will discover when he reads *Hansard* that I made it clear several times that we want to accelerate the deployment of nuclear power.

Paddy Tipping: What is the position then? Is nuclear power still a sort of last resort, ranking behind renewables? What does the hon. Gentleman say to his errant colleague Mr. Goldsmith, who says that his position—and he has been an adviser to the Tory party—is a no to nuclear power.

Mr. Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is using tactics typical of those on his Front Bench. Instead of discussing the issues of the day and taking responsibility, he has shifted the argument to the Opposition. His party has been in power for 10 years, during which our nuclear power capability has shrunk. It took 22 years to get a spark out of Dungeness, but we have reached the point where nuclear power facilities are closing faster than we can replace them. That took place on the hon. Gentleman's watch; it was nothing to do with Tory policy.

Paddy Tipping: We need new investment in generation capacity of £95 billion to £200 billion. Companies such as EDF want to know whether the policy framework will be secure into the future, because in a difficult capital market it is hard to see where those sums will come from. We must remember that of the big six players in the UK, four are truly international companies. It is far from clear that money will be invested in this country, so we must ensure that we have a set of policies that can encourage investment into the future. At the cornerstone of those policies is a robust and high carbon price.

John Robertson: May I tell my hon. Friend not to take any history lessons from the Opposition, because the reinvention of history that we are hearing today bears no resemblance to what has happened in the past 25 years, particularly in the nuclear industry? Does he agree that the Government's policy of proceeding with the Planning Act 2008, the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Energy Bill is the right way forward, and that we should all get back to talking about what is important, which is the needs of the people of this country?

Paddy Tipping: And the need of the people of this country is to keep the lights on. There is a potential energy difficulty in 2015-17, and it is clear to me that we must encourage investment to ensure that we can keep the lights on. One way to do that, which my hon. Friend has always championed, is to bring on new nuclear generation. The Opposition may not like it, but they are Johnny-come-latelys to nuclear. There are differences between those on their Front-Bench team about nuclear power. If we are to ensure that the first new nuclear plant is open by 2017, we must ensure that companies such as EDF are confident that their investment will last into the future.

Mr. Jamie Reed: My hon. Friend will know, because he is a keen student of such issues, that every major nuclear decision in this country has been made by a Labour Government—from Calder Hall onwards. He mentioned the Copenhagen conference, but does he, like the rest of the policy-making world, believe that it is much harder for the Secretary of State to strike a deal with Environment Secretaries from other countries, because when they look at Britain's putative alternative Government they see that they increasingly consist of climate change deniers?

Paddy Tipping: My hon. Friend makes the point. It is clear from the discussion in the Chamber, and from the policies announced by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), who used to be the shadow Home Secretary, that there are real difficulties about investment in the future. To put it simply, they just do not know what they are doing. As they say in my part of the country, they don't know their arse from their elbow.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I shall not ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw those remarks, but perhaps he should choose his words a little more carefully.

Paddy Tipping: I take your reproach, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Those words will be read down the coal pit in Welbeck in Edwinstowe, and the miners there will know what I am talking about, even if it offends some of the people in this Chamber.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been a champion in the process of preparing for Copenhagen, but I am not confident that the discussions will produce that high and stable carbon price for the future. He describes getting an agreement there as plan A. We need to consider plan B. There is an argument that if we want investment on such a scale, we need to ensure that we in the UK can underwrite the price of carbon—that there can be a ceiling on that price, to drive the investment forward. It is not a decision that we need to take this year, pre-Copenhagen or straight afterwards, but ultimately a decision will have to be made about how we can promote new investment. The obvious way is to maintain a robust carbon price into the future.

One way of bringing on new fossil fuel plant—new clean coal plant—is through a carbon capture and storage levy. That is in the Bill, and I welcome it, even though it is a little late. The rules of the competition seem to have changed over time, and the end date, even today, is not entirely clear, but four new projects here in the UK will be a tremendous development. I want my right hon. Friend to initiate that quickly. I want him to listen to the miners in Nottinghamshire, who know that although Harworth colliery is mothballed, it could be reopened and new reserves could be accessed. That is what UK Coal, the owners, would want to do, if £200 million were available.

That sort of money is pretty tough to raise on the capital markets just now. In recognition of that, there have been discussions with the European Investment Bank about a loan. The discussions have gone well. The sticking point appears to be that the EIB says that any coal that comes from Harworth should be burned cleanly. At present there is no power station in the UK that can provide that. I want to stick up for and protect mineworkers in Nottinghamshire and steelworkers in Middlesbrough and Redcar, because we owe it to them. They have given their lives and their health to keep us warm, so anything that my right hon. Friend can do with the EIB would be extremely helpful.

My right hon. Friend ought to pick up on two other points about carbon capture and storage. The first is that it is important not to let the market operate, but to take a strategic approach. E.ON's development at Kingsnorth is long delayed, but were it to win the competition, there would be sense in talking to E.ON and the rival company, RWE, which has a power station just over the river at the Isle of Grain, to ensure that any demonstration plant at Kingsnorth was significant, with sufficient capacity to act as a cluster. We do not want stranded assets.

We should look at the work that Yorkshire Forward has been doing in the Yorkshire coalfield down the Humber valley and take a strategic approach to carbon capture and storage. In Committee we need to debate that and think it through extremely carefully.

We should be clear that the cost of the levy will fall on customers' bills. One of the Government's aims, in addition to security of supply and a reduction in carbon emissions, is affordable heat. As politicians we must recognise that there is increasing consumer resistance to rises in bills. The £2 billion cost of the levy will be passed on to customers. They are beginning to say, "But we're paying the social tariffs." About 1 per cent. of their bill is for social tariffs, and 9 per cent. is for environmental purposes, to deliver the ROC obligation. In future that could rise to 20 per cent. There will come a point when customers say, "Enough is enough," and in the immediate short term we need to ensure that bills are detailed enough for customers to understand what they are paying for. Given the rising bills—the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) quoted the figures—it is important that we look at social tariffs. Some companies, such as Centrica, have an excellent reputation and record, but we need to go further, which is why I support mandatory social tariffs.

I look forward to discussing in Committee who might benefit from such tariffs, because they should apply not only to elderly people, but to people who are in fuel poverty generally. Last winter, 5 million people experienced fuel poverty, including a group below pensionable age with long-term illnesses. We need to look carefully for ways in which we can help them, and we need to discuss mandatory social tariffs in a wider context.

Sir Robert Smith: The hon. Gentleman, in his intervention on the Secretary of State, specifically mentioned Macmillan, which has taken this issue forward. It provides a helpline to support people with cancer, and one of the commonest questions asked is, "How do we cope with our energy bills?" That is because when someone is being treated for cancer, not only do they often become more sensitive to a shortage of heat, but their income falls at the same time, because their employment is disrupted.

Paddy Tipping: The hon. Gentleman has a long track record of following the subject of fuel poverty, and he is exactly right. I look forward to a more detailed discussion about how to tackle that problem.

As I have said, we need to set social tariffs in a wider context. The Warm Front budget is clearly under real pressure, and there needs to be a discussion about its future. The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), who will wind up the debate, has made some very welcome changes to Warm Front, but I want us not only to roll out smart meters but to give people real practical assistance with energy issues such as efficiency and insulation. I want us to roll out smart meters at the same time as we give advice.

John Robertson: Members in all parts of the House agree that smart meters are important, but, from what I have seen of them on television over the past week or so, I think that they will be quite technically challenging for some members of our communities, particularly the elderly, the frail, people with sight problems and so on. We really have to provide education as well as the meter.

Paddy Tipping: I am sure that that is right. Smart meters with a visual display will clearly be interesting for some people but a turn-off for others. Nevertheless,

[Paddy Tipping]

now that we have the technology to look at a minute-by-minute, second-by-second account of our energy use, it is clearly right that we structure the market to ensure that elderly people and those with visual handicaps know that they are getting the best deal.

I talked about a wider discussion, and I am keen to discuss the winter fuel allowance. Last year it cost £2.7 billion, and I am not entirely confident that we get the best out of it. Of those who received the allowance, it is estimated that only 12 per cent. were in fuel poverty. We need to make some tough choices about how best to use our resources, and as part of a debate about mandatory social tariffs, Warm Front and Eaga we need to discuss whether the winter fuel allowance is the best way forward.

The final part of the Bill deals with, and extends, the role of Ofgem. My respect for Ofgem has grown over the past 12 months, when, under pressure from Government, it has become much more proactive. I welcome its quarterly reports, in which it is interesting to follow the tracks and see the gross margins that have been made by all the energy companies. We must extend Ofgem's role by giving it more investigatory powers and greater responsibilities, to ensure that customers benefit as soon as possible from those powers.

The case for going to the Competition Commission has been argued on both sides of the House today. However, let us be clear about this: it would probably take two years for that inquiry to come round, and during that period the big energy companies would not be investing. It is as simple as that. If people want £95 billion or £200 billion of investment, a Competition Commission inquiry would be completely the wrong way to go about getting it. It would stop that investment in its tracks, because companies such as E.ON and RWE would make decisions to invest elsewhere in the world, and we need that finance here.

The big issue for us at the moment is the renewal of our generating capacity by 2020. The Bill goes a small way towards achieving that, and I support it, although I am not entirely confident that it is supported throughout the House. I look forward to the debate in Committee, because it is a valuable, if modest, Bill, which could still be improved.

5.52 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), the acting Chairman of the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change, who speaks with a long-held interest in energy issues.

The hon. Gentleman ended where I begin: by contrasting the Bill before us with the great task that begins today across the North sea in Copenhagen. Earlier, I put it to the Secretary of State—he responded positively—that Copenhagen requires the United Kingdom and the European Union to be ambitious, bold and brave in reaching for the best possible permanent deal. That is obvious. We could also have had an ambitious energy Bill being debated in this country at the same time but, to repeat the word used by the hon. Member for Sherwood, this is a very modest Bill indeed.

Having been in the House throughout the period, my analysis is that, after nearly 13 years in government, Labour's energy policy is perceived by many of my constituents and those of many colleagues as having left millions of the British public out in the cold. They feel worse off, not better off, as a result of the energy policies of the past 12 and a half years—and they are worse off. Energy is costing them more and the future is less certain. The number of people who spend more than 10p in the pound on their fuel bills has gone up, not down, and that situation is likely to get worse, not better, given the price increases in oil and gas that they know they are to expect. If the Government had been really bold and determined, they could have said, "This is the opportunity to try to put high fuel bills that people cannot afford behind us once and for all."—in other words, to do the sort of social justice legislating that I thought Labour came to power to deliver. It is therefore sad that, on the first day of the Copenhagen conference, when people are calling for radical action abroad, we are not seeing extensive and radical proposals at home.

Over the past 12 and a half years, the response to variations in fuel costs has been a system that, although welcome when delivered, is very much one in which Labour makes people dependent on themselves. The winter fuel payment, which is a better system than the benefits system if people do not claim the benefits, has been given irregularly, spasmodically and unpredictably. There has not been a built-in subsidy for poor people, or a guaranteed, legislated-for provision so that people know they will be able to afford their bills. That is in the Bill—we are now seeing it for the first time ever—but it has taken 12 and a half years for a Labour Government to realise that without guarantees in law, people often end up paying much too high a price.

As we have heard, there are three issues before us. Many of us wish that there were many more and that this was legislation in which the Government nailed their colours to the mast of continuing to support and to develop support for the renewables sector, which is growing, but from a terribly lame and slow start. Of course, in some respects there is a difference between my colleagues and I and both the Government and the Conservatives. We do not think that the future lies in nuclear power, which is always expensive, always delivered late and always risky because of the fuel that we import and the failure to find ways to store, let alone to dispose of properly, the waste that is created. Nothing that has recently come to light suggests that nuclear power will become any more safe or secure in future, as the climate change crisis affects Britain and we get more floods, more storms and more risk of disruption, with the same things happening around the world. For this country, which is so well placed with our wind, wave and tidal power, renewables are a far safer and saner route forward, and that is the way we should go.

Mr. Ellwood: As I do with much Lib Dem policy, I am having a few problems understanding this. If the hon. Gentleman is against nuclear policy per se, why does he support the nuclear deterrent? From a safety perspective, he seems to have one rule for our service personnel working on nuclear submarines and another for the civilian population.

Simon Hughes: Those are entirely different arguments, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, having also been involved in this debate for a long time. I will not be

distracted into a debate on defence, although I am happy to have it another time. The position we have always taken is that we have inherited a nuclear deterrent that, in the multilateral negotiations that are coming up next year, we should use to lever down the number of nuclear weapons in the world, with a world policy and a national policy of reducing dependence on things nuclear.

We believe that, having gone down the nuclear road in this country and seen that it is unsatisfactory—it was not at all successfully developed under past Tory Governments—it is completely the wrong road to go down under any prospective Government, whether Labour or Conservative, or with somebody else in the lead.

Mr. Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman talked about the security of fuel supply. As I recall, the main sources of nuclear fuel are Australia and Canada, which are surely much more secure places to get fuel from than the middle east or Russia.

Simon Hughes: Some of the sources of supply that we need for nuclear are not in those countries but elsewhere, and there are predictions that they may run out in the foreseeable future and that prices may become significantly higher. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that, in a world of uncertainty, transporting around the world things that are needed to create nuclear power is a safe and sensible thing to do, he can make that argument, but it is not finding much credence with the public, who, on all the opinion poll evidence, find the idea of renewables a much more satisfactory way forward than nuclear power.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Simon Hughes: Let me make a bit more progress. I do not want to get bogged down in nuclear, which is not in the Bill, nor should it be. We are not in favour of it, and we hope that in the end the Government realise that they should not support it either.

The first item in the Bill is carbon capture and storage. Ministers know that we support CCS technology, which is vital if we are to make coal our servant in the years to come and ensure that it does not produce the same problems for our planet in the future that it has in the past. It needs to be seen to be commercially viable, and one difficulty has been that we have been really slow off the mark. That is not the fault of the Secretary of State or the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), but it was in 2006 that the Select Committee on Science and Technology said of carbon capture and storage:

"Multiple full scale demonstration projects using different types of capture technology and storage conditions are urgently needed."

The first demonstration project was in 1996 in Norway. Why have we been waiting? What has caused the delay? Why, for 12 and a half years, when the technology has been developed elsewhere in the world, have we not sought to advance the CCS that we have always known we would need? We are now going to have to try to catch up, but with other countries much further ahead, it might be as easy for us to take the technology from them as to develop our own.

I would be interested to hear from the Secretary of State why the Government have not yet come clean on their response to the results of their consultation, which ended in September, on having a framework of emissions performance standards for the whole coal industry. He did not allude to that in his opening speech, so I hope that the Minister of State will do so in her response. In the debate in the summer on a Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy), the Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change said that he supported the general direction of it, but it was a sort of St. Augustine's reply—"But not yet." He said:

"The Government's position is that in our general policy direction, we are where every Member who has spoken has urged us to be. We have already commenced a consultation on the best way to get a detailed policy so that we can travel forward... I believe that consultation is a very good thing and an important component of getting policy right." [*Official Report*, 3 July 2009; Vol. 495, c. 636.]

The consultation has ended, and we are clear that there ought to be—*[Interruption.]* I know that the Government have responded, but we need to know what they will do now. It is generally accepted that the current carbon price is not the stable one that this country and the world need, and that it needs to stabilise at something much more like €50 or €60 a tonne than the present €14 a tonne.

Given the European Union directive on clean coal, which will come into force at the end of the next decade, we need a clear position on the future of coal in this country. There has to be a clear statement that there will be no new coal-fired power stations without carbon capture and storage working right from the beginning, not retrofitted later. Without that absolute parameter, the industry will not know where it stands, and Ministers know that we are likely to have new coal-fired, dirty coal power stations that will contribute to worsening the climate crisis rather than help to solve it.

Another question about the CCS levy has been asked a couple of times already. I assume that the Secretary of State—again, he was silent on the matter—does not expect the parts of the energy industry that do not release carbon into the atmosphere to contribute to the levy to fund CCS demonstration projects. I assume that under the regulations that he anticipates—like the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), I believe that it would be helpful to see them in draft—the renewables sector will not have to contribute. It would be nonsense if the sector that does not contribute to the climate crisis and the emissions problem had to pay to develop the technology for making dirty coal clean.

One other point on the technology of carbon capture and storage has not so far been alluded to, and I would be grateful if the Minister of State mentioned it in her response. She has said before how important it is that we share the technology that we develop in this country with developing countries in other parts of the world. It is not just we in the rich west who will need CCS; it is eastern European countries such as Poland, as well as countries such as China. What will happen to the intellectual property of the technology that the prototype plants will produce? I hope that it will be shared and that we do not just develop it to be nationalistic. I understand that all the CCS interests are to be consortiums of companies, some British but mostly international, in locations up and down the east coast, so I hope it is clear that we will share the technology and intellectual property and ensure that we have the power to help the developing world and not just ourselves.

[Simon Hughes]

The second section of the Bill is probably the most immediately important to our constituents, because it is about how we deal with rising and, for many people, unaffordable fuel bills. The Government know how embarrassing their record on that is. Again, that is not because of this Secretary of State, but his Government should be embarrassed about the cost of fuel to the poor over the past 12 and a half years. They set a statutory target, which still exists in law, to eliminate fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and all households by 2016. I understand that 4.5 million or more households now spend more than 10p in the pound on their fuel bills, compared with 2 million or thereabouts only four years ago. We know that there are explanations for part of that and that there has been a massive failure to take up benefits and tax credits that could help to pay the bills. However, it is not just pensioners who are affected but single-parent families and those with long-term illness, who do not benefit from the winter fuel payment. The hon. Member for Sherwood alluded to that. The whole system has failed to ensure that the poor and the vulnerable are protected.

Another group affected, which is often spoken for by Liberal Democrat Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith), is the large number of people who live off the gas grid. They may live near it, but they have not been protected at all by the system. They have had to buy their liquified petroleum gas or oil fuel and get it into the tank at the bottom of the garden, and nothing has protected them. There have been 12 and a half years in which some of the rural poor have not been assisted at all, along with many of the urban and suburban poor.

Ministers know that the Liberal Democrats are again going to criticise the fact that all the schemes for warm homes have been piecemeal, limited and inadequate responses. They have told us this year that only one in 80 homes in Britain is a warm home, so we need a scheme that encompasses everybody. The carbon emissions reduction target and Warm Front are inadequate. Age Concern tells me that it receives 5,000 complaints about Warm Front every year, and CERT does not have reducing fuel poverty as a key objective. I understand that Warm Front funding will be cut by half next year, from £350 million to about £176 million, because some of the money was brought forward. The size of the grant has been kept the same, but fewer and fewer people are benefitting. We have heard the example of the latest pilot scheme, which is for but a handful of people.

If Ministers had said that they wanted a scheme rolled out across Britain, led by Government and using local councils, to make every home a warm home within 10 years, as we have argued for, they would have had our support. [*Interruption.*] Of course it costs money, but there are ways of doing it and I have explained them in the House. The Government could underwrite a loan that was paid back over a maximum of 10 years. Of course there would have to be investment for that underwriting, but it would be worth it. It would save on CO_2 emissions, produce warm homes, reduce winter deaths and insulate housing.

I would have liked the Government to display that sort of ambition, and I would have liked them to tackle the problem of those who pay far more than average for their fuel bills because they are not connected to the gas grid. The figures that I currently have are that the average bill of someone on mains gas is £568 a year, that of someone on domestic fuel oil more than £1,000 a year and that of someone on LPG more than £1,300 a year. There is no justification for that inequity in this country today.

There is plenty of evidence and Select Committees have put the argument for change on an all-party basis, but the problem is getting worse. We know that last year, gas bills year went up by 58 per cent. and that this year, when gas prices came down, bills decreased by only 6 per cent. Last year, electricity bills went up by 28 per cent., but when prices came down this year, they decreased by only 8 per cent. The reality is that the system has not properly regulated bills according to the wholesale prices paid by the utility companies that supply the product.

There have been opportunities in this place to legislate along these lines. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) introduced a Bill to deal with high fuel bills earlier this year, but the Minister resisted and talked it out, and did not let it proceed. The reality is that it is bit late now, in the last months of a Labour Government, to get a Bill through to paper over the cracks and to try to cover the embarrassment that they know they feel, in however limited a way. They have not delivered to their constituents, but far worse, they have not delivered to the public as a whole.

There is one very odd bit of the Bill that I hope the Minister can explain. Clause 14, "Schemes for reducing fuel poverty", states:

"For the purposes of this Part, fuel poverty is reduced if... (a) the number of people living in fuel poverty is reduced, or ...(b) the extent to which any person is living in fuel poverty is reduced"

and clause 14(4) appears to give the Secretary of State by regulation the opportunity to redefine fuel poverty. I should like clarification of that, because we have seen plenty of figures massaged over the years. I know the Government are embarrassed, and they know they are embarrassed, but we need to be clear. If the general understanding is that when we talk about fuel poverty, we are talking about people who pay more than 10 per cent. of their income for fuel, that should remain as the definition. Ministers, whether of this Government or the next, should not have a chance to change it and to pretend that the problem is less than it is.

On the regulation of the energy market, if this was a Bill to really get to grips with Ofgem and produce a regulator that regulated in the consumer interest, people would say, "Amen." However, I sense the Bill will be not nearly as tough as that. The Secretary of State has spoken to Ofgem and told it that if it does not behave, there will be more draconian powers, but the Bill introduces only a modest change to its regulatory authority.

Of course, there is some good stuff. The provision to ensure that energy transmission costs, which could result in higher bills if companies argued that they had low capacity in the grid, cannot be a method of exploiting the consumer is a good thing, and we welcome it. It is also good that the time period for investigations will be extended. There have been lots of abuses. I have seen cases in the paper and I have spoken to people who have had repayments of more than £1,000 from npower, because there has been a fiddling of the tariff and a

misrepresentation of the cost. Those cases were taken up and awards were made in favour of those people. What will happen to cases that are currently timed out, but in which there has been a clear breach? I am not asking for retrospective legislation, but what remedy is there for people who have a clear, justifiable complaint against utility companies that has not been met?

I am concerned that nothing in the Bill will make Ofgem more open to the consumer, accountable and transparent. Ministers know what Consumer Focus, Which? and others are asking for—that Ofgem meet in public and that it include representatives of the public. The regulatory body needs to be much more accountable if it is to have the confidence of the public.

There is now going to be, for the first time, an ability to change the rules on the method of payment and the Government will have the power to control such things. The current voluntary system to which, as I understand it, the energy companies have subscribed, means they do not currently charge more, for example, for prepayment meters. However, I am concerned that some of the companies have indicated, even this winter, that they may be willing to go back on the system and charge more. Scottish and Southern Energy, for example, has said that it intends to withdraw its offer of equalisation at the end of this winter.

The hon. Member for Sherwood led into my speech by saying that this is a modest Bill, which sadly it is. In Committee, we will seek to make it tougher. We will seek to make Ofgem's powers tougher and the rights of the consumer greater and to ensure that the schemes for making our homes in Britain warmer and better insulated are much more extensive. We will also seek to ensure that the CCS proposals do not penalise the renewables sector, which has just been re-incentivised by increased support. We need that support to go on growing, and we must not be seen as punishing or hindering such development.

We hope that we will make the Bill stronger and tougher. The Secretary of State has promised to be bold when he goes to Copenhagen in the next couple of days. I hope he will be, but I also hope that he will leave a message for his ministerial colleagues who will be in Committee that if the last of the Labour Government's Energy Bills is to be worth having, it needs to be much tougher, bolder and socially just.

6.16 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Hon. Members have this afternoon said that the Bill is a modest one. It is indeed modest if one goes by the number of clauses or what it provides by way of new legislation in the light of what we know are the challenges ahead. However, when considering Bills, it is important to understand clearly what we need to legislate on at particular times. It is important to ask what has already happened legislatively and what is still required. It is also important to ask what the role of regulation is and what are the roles of future initiatives, which stem from powers given by the Bill and other legislation, in meeting the energy challenge ahead of us.

The reality is that the Bill builds on the Energy Act 2008 and a number of other items of legislation to make some progress on issues relating to the energy challenge. In any event, regulatory powers are already available and financial investments can and are being made. There is a strategy for ensuring that a new low-carbon energy economy properly protects those in fuel poverty, and for ensuring that the future base load of our energy supply, which will inevitably concern coal and gas in future, is properly developed as far as the low-carbon form of energy supply and CCS are concerned. The regulator has the base powers to regulate the energy market as it becomes much more sustainable. They may appear to be modest legislative achievements, but they underpin a much greater step forward.

What we have heard this afternoon concerns me. The Opposition claim that they will allow the Bill a Second Reading and make changes in Committee, but they would, were they to have their way, have a huge legislative programme. They make declaratory statements on everything under the sun as far as energy policy is concerned, including on a great deal of legislation that, unless they have been completely oblivious of what has been happening in the House, they would notice has already actually been passed.

For example, we know that as a result of the 2008 Act, a feed-in tariff for smaller-scale electricity generation will be introduced soon. We know that the year after that a renewable heat incentive will come in. Incidentally, that will be the first introduced by any Government anywhere in the world to ensure that renewable heat is part of a programme of moving towards low-carbon domestic and commercial energy for providing heat.

Having that legislation in place will help when it comes to the next stage in energy efficiency for households and domestic properties, because that will require not just passive insulation and energy efficiency measures but active measures such as the installation of small-scale or district generation in domestic properties. That can reduce the carbon footprint of a house radically over time. Therefore the future relates to regulation following from legislation that has already been passed, and the will to ensure that that happens actively in the future. The claim that an opportunity to pass legislation has been missed in those areas is to misunderstand how one makes progress with a renewable and sustainable energy policy. I do not claim that that is a deliberate misunderstanding, but a misunderstanding it is, nevertheless.

It concerns me when that misunderstanding is compounded by simplistic claims about how progress can be made on these issues. We have heard the suggestion—it was repeated this afternoon—that every household should be given £6,500, and that that will sort out the whole question of insulation and active energy generation concerns. As a result, it is suggested, we will have fully insulated and approaching zero-carbon households, but it is akin to the other short-lived policy we heard about a while ago, whereby everybody was to put £8,000 into the pot and they would then have their health and social care needs taken care of for the rest of their lives. That policy ran into similar mathematical difficulties.

The mathematics of the £6,500 policy—over and above requiring loan guarantees of some £160 billion to £170 billion to be injected into the economy if the guarantee is from the public purse—would require savings of £360 a year, if the loan is to be serviced and assuming that it would not be just given out to householders.

Mr. Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is making one or two errors in interpreting our policy. The amount would be up to £6,500, because not every home would require the same level of cost-effective investment. Any private

[Mr. Goodwill]

company that can save money on its electric bills by investment is doing so: the problem with individuals is that they cannot borrow the money in the same way as businesses. This scheme would enable them to draw down their future energy savings to invest in the energy efficiency of their homes. It seems a bit of a no-brainer to me.

Dr. Whitehead: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman intervened at the moment that he did and in the way that he did because he has completely anticipated my next point. Despite the fact that the leader of his party insisted that every family in the country could spend £6,500 on their household energy efficiency—and the shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change emphasised that point in the House recently—the truth of the matter is that in practice it would be nothing like that sum. And if it were £6,500, it would be unsustainable to support, in terms of the investment required to underpin it. It is only because the sum would be nothing like £6,500—it would be more like £1,500 on average under the Conservatives' blue-green energy proposals—that funding the policy even starts to become conceivable for most households. Indeed, the savings suggested for an expenditure of £1,500 are the full £360 that would be needed to underpin the £6,500 in terms of the interest that would be lost through granting that sum. It is claimed that those savings would result from measures such as the installation of low-energy light bulbs, cavity wall insulation and roof insulation, all of which have already been legislated for to a considerable extent, or are under way. By 2011, for example, low-energy light bulbs will be in place across the whole of the UK. The Conservative's policy does not take seriously the real job that needs to be done, especially on fuel poverty, or the investment in efficient homes that it will be necessary to undertake.

The recent White Paper, which does take the issue seriously, proposed that all homes should have a whole-house package—to be achieved not by legislative means but through other measures—to include cost-effective energy saving measures plus renewable heat and electricity measures as appropriate by 2030, and all lofts and cavity walls to be insulated, where practicable, by 2015. It also included the development of new ways to provide financial support so that people could make more substantial energy saving and renewable energy improvements. Does it not appear sensible to work out how that can be done properly in order to pursue the policy, instead of magicking a sum of money out of thin air, which would be completely insupportable in the real world? Would it not make more sense to examine placing a charge on the district network operator for the supply to the household? Would it not make sense to consider how loans could come into the equation to overcome the capital costs of such energy-saving devices? Would it not make sense to consider the option of leasing, or to pilot some of these schemes so that what we say and what we can do are the same thing? In a future low-carbon energy economy, the savings will need to match up to the investment so that the householder will be in a win-win situation in terms of their energy bills as well as the security of a well-insulated, low-carbon house.

We need to be clear that whatever the oscillation in energy prices in the future, they will be high and will get higher. There is therefore a particular onus on us to bring forward serious and well-thought-out programmes to ensure that those people who are not able to afford their energy bills now—let alone future higher energy bills—are proofed against those bills for a long time to come.

We need to be looking at a quantum shift in our understanding of what an energy bill should consist of and what those in fuel poverty face in paying their fuel bills. For the future, I envisage that happening in much the same way that council tax is paid—everybody pays it, but there is a rebate for those in less fortunate financial circumstances—so that a number of people are thereby effectively excluded or only partially included in the process of paying energy bills. Having a requirement in the Bill that social tariffs be introduced by legislation in future, rather than by voluntary agreement, seems to be a move towards that idea. We are all in this together, in ensuring that we have a low-carbon energy economy, alongside what we know will be high prices for energy supplies, but at the same time ensuring that the effects of that high-cost energy economy are not brought to bear in a most cruel way on those who can least afford to finance such an energy economy.

Therefore, a fuel poverty strategy should combine several different factors, not all of which will exactly correlate with each other. It is not the case, for instance, that everybody who is in fuel poverty lives in a badly insulated house, although a good proportion do so. Therefore, a strategy that moves rapidly towards ensuring that the standard assessment procedure ratings—the SAP ratings—of houses across the country are raised substantially, in order to fuel-poverty proof those houses as far as possible, seems absolutely essential. However, it is also not the case that simply doing that will cause everybody who is now in fuel poverty not to be in fuel poverty. It is also not the case that everyone who is in fuel poverty stays in the same house. Therefore, a programme to ensure social tariffs, tariff reductions and affordable tariffs for those in fuel poverty—these might be related as, in effect, a gateway benefit, in respect of other indicators of the fact that a person in fuel poverty lives in a house that is not well insulated—would seem to be a way forward in ensuring, as far as possible, that fuel poverty becomes a thing of the past in our future energy economy.

We have to be honest and reflect on the indicators of fuel poverty. Although it is widely accepted that those who spend more than 10 per cent.—10p in a pound—on their energy bills are in fuel poverty, that definition rises or falls precisely with energy prices. Some 40,000 people will be in fuel poverty if fuel prices rise by 1 per cent., yet they will apparently come out of fuel poverty if fuel prices fall by 1 per cent., regardless of their objective circumstances before or after that price rise or fall. Therefore, attempting to secure a combination of factors in fighting fuel poverty, so that people are fuel-poverty proofed as far as possible, seems to be the right way forward. That will require a combination of legislation and regulation on a series of important fronts. It is therefore interesting to note that the code for sustainable buildings, which will ensure by 2016 that the building of new houses is carbon-neutral as far as possible, which will, among other things, help to increase the SAP rating of UK housing stock, is not based on legislation.

Martin Horwood: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with us that it is important to have consistent measures of fuel poverty, so that Governments of any colour

cannot wriggle out of their responsibilities, and that therefore clause 14, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) drew our attention earlier and which appears to give the Secretary of State the power to change and flex the definition, is rather dangerous and ought to be removed?

Dr. Whitehead: There is a distinction between ensuring that the definition of fuel poverty works in the way that I have described and a clause in a Bill that enables a Government simply to declare that fuel poverty does not exist. As the hon. Gentleman says, it would be a bad outcome if a Government were able, by a legislative ruse, to declare that fuel poverty did not exist. However, as we all know that it does exist and as we have a definition in the Bill that is not to be removed, the question is how we ensure, through a combination of fuel-poverty proofing, social tariffs and reduced tariffs, and through how they cross over for people living in particular houses, that fuel poverty is combated rather more effectively than previously.

I want to say a few words about the future of our energy supply. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) mentioned, the test of the success or otherwise of our whole strategy of moving towards a low-carbon fuel economy will be the extent to which we effectively replace the 40 or so per cent. of our existing electricity supply with a low-carbon electricity supply. Over the next 10 to 15 years, all but one of our nuclear power stations will go out of commission, as will all our coal-fired power stations, a number of gas-fired power stations and, as things stand, all our oil-fired power stations, through a combination of age, end of life, the European large combustion plant directive and associated activities. It is imperative that that process should take clear note of the need to ensure, first, that we have a base load capacity in our fuel economy and, secondly, that we do not require investors in new plant—let us be clear: by and large, the investors in any new plant will be the energy companies that currently supply our energy investment in the UK—to invest in plant that will become redundant or a stranded asset as soon as it is installed.

That will require two things to happen. First, we need to ensure that the capacity exists to invest in both coal and gas, while at the same time squaring the circle of that investment for a future low-carbon economy. Secondly, it is absolutely right that we should send out strong signals about carbon capture and storage for those new investments. It is also absolutely right, therefore, that we should put in place a legislative framework through this Bill to move ahead with carbon capture and storage, both pre-combustion and post-combustion, coupled with a serious tranche of new powers for the regulator to ensure that the energy market works in a more carefully regulated way.

One thing to emerge as a result of those changes is that in future we will live in a far more regulated energy economy. Indeed, it is right that we should do so, because we have serious targets to reach, a short time in which to reach them and a series of replacements that we need to make in our generating capacity to enable us to reach them, rather than standing against them. Therefore, a combination of this legislation and Ofgem being able to recast the market arrangements for the generation of electricity, so that it underpins new investment in a positive way, will be a good achievement of the Bill should it become law.

If we are to regulate positively to achieve our aims, it is important that we all face in the same direction, and that we do not place on the statute book legislation that resiles from those aims. I was therefore concerned to hear proposals from Conservative Members for legislation to prevent onshore wind energy from being put in place anywhere in the country if it is less than a specified distance from a house or dwelling. The aim of that proposal is not, as has been suggested by Opposition Front Benchers, to involve communities more in onshore wind development. It is simply to stop onshore wind farms being put in place.

Giving that kind of signal through legislation would prevent the investment in our energy supply that we need to replace our ageing equipment, and create uncertainty in the market. Our claim to be able to move forward on to a low-carbon economy would effectively be rugby tackled by legislation that would make that impossible to achieve. I am sorry that, when those on the Opposition Front Bench were given the opportunity to repudiate that approach today, they simply ducked the question and said that it was nothing to do with them. It is something to do with them.

We should place on record that we will put on the statute book legislation and regulations that will move us solidly in the direction of a low-carbon economy, to ensure that the people who are going to be paying their bills in such an economy are not so disadvantaged by what that economy is going to produce that they cannot take part in it. We should all face in the same direction on this, and we must make it clear that we do not support anything that goes against that. I hope that when the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman sums up their case on this Second Reading debate he will take the opportunity to repudiate that it is any part of their policy to stop the development of onshore wind farms by placing distance barriers in the way of such developments, thereby preventing them from going ahead.

6.43 pm

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), but I must begin by correcting him. He has spent the past 10 minutes talking about Tory policy, and I hope that that theme will not continue through the debate. I want to clarify the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) put clearly into context the remarks about wind farms made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke).

It was, however, the comments made by the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) *[Interruption.]* I have inadvertently promoted him. The hon. Member for Sherwood made a thoughtful speech, and he made two points that I hope those on both Front Benches will listen to. First, he talked about the rising cost of winter fuel allowances, which needs to be addressed. Is it right that we should pour so much money into heating houses, rather than making them capable of requiring less heat by insulating them? He also raised the possibility of power cuts in 2017—I see him nodding—

[Mr. Tobias Ellwood]

which is a prospect that the Secretary of State refused to acknowledge even though he wrote about it not long ago.

We have gathered here today to debate the Second Reading of this Bill, but there is another gathering taking place in Copenhagen. That involves a significant grouping of international leaders who are hoping to move the debate on the 1997 Kyoto protocol forward. We must all wish that conference well, but also bear in mind that it took more than eight years for much of that protocol to become law. Our hopes are high that we shall see agreement on the targets for greenhouse gas emissions, on financial support for adaptation to climate change in developing countries and on the carbon trading scheme. I shall not hold my breath while waiting to see any of that put on the statute book, however, because of the slowness of planning and the delays involved in Government agreements. All that goes against the grain of what we have heard on both sides of the House about the urgency of dealing with climate change and the demise of this country's natural resources.

I visited Cumbria last week. We do not know whether the flooding there was caused by climate change, but many of the images that we saw on television are still vivid in our minds. I want to place on record the fact that Cumbria is very much open for business. Yes, there have been problems in Cockermouth, but Lake Windermere is back to its normal levels, and the people there are calling for tourists to visit the area. When we debate climate change, we need to be careful not to label or identify places that have been affected and simply leave it at that. We can incur damage if we do not subsequently confirm that repairs have been made. The fighting spirit of the people in Cumbria has got it back to business as normal, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. We can show that gratitude by sending out the message that the Lake district is very much open for business.

I am delighted to be participating in this Second Reading debate, not only to underline my own views on climate change but to comment on the demise of our own natural resources. As I said in my interventions on the Secretary of State, I am very concerned about what has happened to those resources over the past decade. History will look back on that decade with concern that we did not do enough in time to make people aware that our resources were being so greatly reduced.

The risk of blackouts in the future is now a reality, yet we hear denials of that from those on the Government Front Bench. Instead, we get lists of initiatives. Some of them are very good: we have just heard about the longer-lasting light bulbs initiative, and that is fantastic. Unfortunately, however, it does not address the question of what we should do when the oil and gas run out. That is exactly what is happening. In addition, our nuclear power capability used to contribute 30 per cent. of the UK's energy needs; the figure is now down to 12.5 per cent. and falling. We have had many discussions on the further use of coal, but it is now seen as too dirty to use on its own. Extra investment is required, as is further research, because the scale on which we could use carbon capture and storage has yet to be confirmed.

We have also had big debates about renewables. The subject was just raised by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test. I do not doubt that there have been problems over planning in Conservative councils and in others across the country. It is worth putting on record the fact that there are more Conservative councils than there are Labour and Liberal Democrat councils put together, so of course there will be more issues and question marks in relation to those matters. I would like to see more incentives provided by the Government so that councils, regardless of their colour, would be encouraged to look at renewables as opposed to other energy sources.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I do not think that that point has substantial weight. The same sort of attitudes were present before the major wave of new Conservative councils was elected two years or so ago. Often, in the more balanced councils—in terms of political control—it was the Conservative councils that led the opposition to energy initiatives of this kind, so I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's point is all that significant.

Mr. Ellwood: I did not quite understand that intervention.

The point is that today, we are where we are. If councils are not embracing the opportunity for renewables, we need to look at ways of incentivising them to do so. What is wrong is that despite 10 years of commitment by this Government, the contribution to Britain's energy requirement made by renewables has gone from 1 per cent. to 1.3 per cent. That is not good enough, considering the pressure that we are under to find other ways of providing our energy. It is almost as if a pilot were to take off without knowing how much fuel was in the tanks and then started searching around for somewhere to land to refuel. That is not sensible planning for the future. That is my basic argument. What has happened in the last 10 years, as the oil and gas have been running out? The initiatives that we need to prepare ourselves for the future when the lights may be threatened, or indeed turned out, have not been forthcoming.

In Germany it is against the law to run out of fuel while driving a car on the motorway: one has to plan ahead. I wonder what the fine would be for a Government who were running towards empty, or if their tank ran out completely. It would probably be more than this Government could afford.

It is helpful to remind ourselves of our energy needs. It is fair to say that for many years we have been blessed with energy efficiency in this country, as we have had an ample supply. Our requirement is roughly around 60 GW, although it is likely to decline this year, simply because of the recession and the consequent reduction in requirements. Current capacity is 76 GW, so one might ask what all the fuss is about. According to the Government's own statistics, our energy requirements are likely to increase by around 40 per cent. over the next 20 years.

Let us look at our resources more closely. We have known for years that North sea oil is on the decline. Surely the recent oil price spike at $147 a barrel would have set the alarm bells ringing to say that what we are doing is not sustainable. We clearly cannot carry on this way—and not only on account of the cost of the fuel, because it is simply running out. Labour has watched, like a rabbit caught in the headlights, as the North sea oil dials swing round towards empty.

The story with gas is not much different; about a third of our requirements are now imported. UK storage capacity has also changed little. That was pointed out a number of times to the Secretary of State, who gave the most waffly reply I have heard in this Chamber about the reasons why we cannot have a legal requirement, as France and Germany do, to keep a certain number of days' supply of gas in storage in the UK. In France it is 125 days; in Germany it is 95 days; in the UK we average around 15, but last winter we went down to just four days' capacity, coming very close indeed to running on empty.

The question has been raised—the hon. Member who raised it is no longer in his place—about an issue that the Front-Bench teams need to answer: rough storage, and who owns the gas itself. Germany owns a number of the companies that operate in the UK, but is it right that when they are running low on gas, they can remove gas from rough storage here in the UK and take it back to Germany to look after their own residents? The Government should provide an answer to that question.

The nuclear story provides another tale of woe. Again, 30 per cent. of energy needs were once being met, but we are now down to 12.5 per cent. The Magnox fleet is going to disappear almost completely over the next few years, as are pressurised water reactors. These cannot be replaced overnight. The Government are at last waking up, but they will turn around and say, "What are the Conservatives going to do?" That is not a powerful argument, when it is under their watch that the nuclear power capability has been reduced to the point at which we cannot replace those power stations, like for like, in time to meet the same energy requirements as before.

As I said in an earlier intervention, it took 22 years to get planning permission to build the Dungeness nuclear power plant. The processes have been speeded up, but the technology is no longer here in the UK. Virtually every nuclear power station is different—unique—as we have built one, learned from it and then moved on to build another one. That is not a good story. Much of the technology and the people have moved elsewhere, to places such as South Africa, Canada, the United States and France. We should be looking to international organisations to come over here to teach and train us so that we have the right nuclear capability to meet our needs in the future.

Mr. Jamie Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Cumbria, but on the subject of the nuclear industry, I urge him please not to talk down the capability of the UK industry. Many of the points that he has made are not true. I know he is supportive, which I welcome, but let us stick to the facts.

Mr. Ellwood: I am sticking to the facts. I am on the all-party nuclear energy group, and we have made a number of visits across the globe. We meet British people—now slightly aged, I have to say—who worked in the British nuclear industry and have now moved away from it. I could mention the CANDU systems in Canada, the pebble-bed systems in South Africa, and other systems developed in France and Sweden, all of which benefited from British interest and British know-how, as they started off here in the UK.

The second absence from the Bill is any mention of nuclear fusion, and I suspect that not many Members are aware of what is going on in that connection. The Minister of State shakes her head, and if she were to intervene now, she would no doubt say, "Oh, that's 20 years away." Well, it will continue to be 20 years away, so long as we continue to fail to invest in it. Given that that is effectively nuclear power utopia, I cannot understand why we are not doing more to find something that would allow us to build only one more set of nuclear fission reactors before moving over to nuclear fusion. Nuclear fusion combines hydrogen, turning it into helium, creating water, so it is very safe: there is no radioactive material and there are no CO_2 emissions, making it extremely clean. Yet we are doing nothing—no research, no discussion in the UK of how to move that debate forward. Scientists know that that power can be harnessed, but because it a long time in the future, the attitude is that it will not happen on our watch; I am afraid that that is not the right attitude.

As for coal, we have a supply, but as we have known for a long time, it is a big polluter. If we have known that for a long time, why are we only now coming to terms with the challenges, issues and benefits of carbon capture and storage? Again, it is all too late in the day.

Paddy Tipping: The hon. Gentleman will remember the project to develop clean coal technology at Grimesthorpe—but it was closed by the last Tory Government.

Mr. Ellwood: I repeat that that took place before I had the opportunity even to comment on it; I was still at school studying chemistry. The hon. Gentleman has been in the House for 10 years now, and this Government have been responsible for 10 years, so at what point do the Government finally stop using, "Oh, it was the last Government's fault," as an excuse to cover what they are not doing now. That debate is getting very old indeed.

I put it to the Minister that the levy that the Bill introduces will penalise the entire industry, including those who do not produce any CO_2 emissions. Would it not be an incentive for the producers of electricity and energy—and, indeed, the consumers—to move over to greener forms if they knew that they would not then have to pay the levy? I am ready to give way to the Minister to explain, but it does not look as if she is going to intervene. We will wait for her summing up.

Finally, on renewables, the point has been made that we have managed to increase our capability in the UK by only 0.3 per cent. There are more imaginative ways of using renewables. The point has been made that there are so many buildings—council-owned buildings and other public buildings—that would readily provide a place for wind turbines of varying sizes, in order to increase our contribution. Those are not all Tory council town halls either, as there are myriad places where we could do that. That is the approach that we need.

To have 10,000 wind turbines by 2020 is a fantastic target, but this Government did not manage to save a major wind turbine company close to my constituency, in the Isle of Wight. What a shame that it has now gone out of business. I am afraid that this provides another example of people upping sticks and moving out of this country: their experience, technology and resources have now left these shores.

Simon Hughes: I share the hon. Gentleman's regret about the fact that the Danish company Vesta is ending its activities on the Isle of Wight, but I hope that he will

[Simon Hughes]

be open enough to accept that one of the causes of its frustration was the consistent opposition to those activities by the Tory-run council there, and by his Tory colleague the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner). When those at Vesta's headquarters asked what support it was receiving locally, it had to answer, "Very little, if any."

Mr. Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman has made a fair point. As I think I said at the beginning of my speech, we need to find ways of incentivising all councils, whatever their colour or persuasion. If it is true that councils are turning their backs, we must think about how the situation can be reversed. However, I see nothing in the Bill that would take us down that route. I see nothing in it that would persuade councils on the Isle of Wight, in Felixstowe or anywhere else to invest more in technology of this kind.

The position in Europe is just as bleak as it is here in the United Kingdom. Europe is already largely dependent on imports—90 per cent. of oil, 80 per cent. of gas and 50 per cent. of coal come from outside Europe—but we cannot lean on our neighbours and depend on them to provide long-term support for our energy needs. That raises the question of security of supply—another issue that is absent from the Bill. I had an opportunity to visit Georgia and observe the development of pipelines there. A political game was being played, involving the geography of the placing of pipelines in Europe. What is worrying is that Russia is now in a strong position to turn the taps on and off, and we may see prices fluctuate across Europe. We must not find ourselves in that position again, particularly as we approach another tough winter.

We are seeing an abdication of responsibility by the Government. I do not understand the reason for the delay in the introduction of smart meters, and of charging points for electric cars—those were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, and the nation is calling out for them—and the upgrade of the 50-year-old grid. Moreover, surely an energy Bill should focus on reducing heat requirements, given that they constitute 42 per cent. of our energy requirements. It should also focus on greener transport systems. The introduction of TGV-style trains would reduce the need for aeroplanes, and an increase in the number of light railways might encourage people to use their cars less. A particular interest of mine is the introduction of grants or other incentives for councils to provide safer bike lanes, to reduce the need for cars for the school run—a major contributor to road pollution.

There is little in the Bill with which we can disagree—but then there is little in the Bill anyway. As the Copenhagen summit gets under way, I hope that none of the delegates are turning their eyes in the direction of this Chamber to see whether they can learn anything from what is being said here. I fear that they would be sadly disappointed.

From an energy perspective, Labour's period in office will be seen as a wasted decade, and the Bill represents a wasted opportunity. The nation can rightly ask why we have not planned for the future. Our oil and gas are running out, our nuclear power stations are grinding to a halt, and our coal is becoming too expensive and dirty to use. Why has more not been done not only to ensure that we can generate the power that we need, but to ensure that our homes are more energy-efficient? More fundamentally, what has been done to keep the lights on in the future? I believe that we have just 15 days of supply—although that may have been reduced to four days. The test will be the coming winter. I shall be interested to hear about the Minister's plans for the winter, and the emergency procedures that may be required should it be as harsh as winters have been in the past. We are gambling with people's lives, as was proved by the increase in death tolls during last year's harsh winter.

Earlier generations created the problem of greenhouse gases through ignorance. The Government are compounding that problem with arrogance, by doing so little. We have had 15 Energy Ministers in 10 years. That is recycling at its worst. It seems that we must wait for a Conservative Minister to take the neglect of our energy requirements seriously.

7.4 pm

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab): I shall not be as churlish as Opposition Members about the Bill. It is indeed a modest Bill, but I think it unreasonable to expect a compendium Bill dealing with every outstanding energy issue to go through Parliament in the limited time that we have before the general election. For obvious reasons, this Bill focuses on what is needed immediately.

I welcome the Bill, and I gather that, in a way, the Opposition do as well, so I assume that they will not vote against it. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. There are too many sedentary exchanges.

Dr. Turner: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, this is a modest Bill. Only three issues, in my view, have not been addressed at all, or have not been addressed as much as they might have been. The reason why we need the Bill is clear, however. We have a liberalised electricity market, for which we must thank the Opposition in their former role as the Government. I sometimes think that our problems with energy policy would be much easier to deal with if we still had the late, lamented dear old Central Electricity Generating Board. If that were the case, we could simply say, "We are going to do this," rather than having to act through a purely commercial market. All change is not progress, and the liberalised electricity markets have created more problems than solutions.

Low-carbon or zero-carbon technologies cost more than fossil-fuel technologies. It is as simple as that. Deploying those technologies requires market support mechanisms, or, to put it more crudely, subsidies. There is no way of getting around that in the present circumstances, and it is the reason for part 1 of the Bill. No one will invest in the building of plants with carbon capture and storage without a subsidy to cover the extra cost. That basic fact applies to renewable energy and, indeed, to the nuclear industry. If the nuclear industry had to compete with gas or coal-fired power generation on costs, it would not have a chance. It has made that clear through a number of darkly muttered remarks, for example, about the need for a sufficiently high carbon price to underpin its investment. The industry would also like long-term supply contracts, thank you very much, to guarantee it flat-out running of its reactors and make it as economic as possible.

Mr. Goodwill: The playing field would, of course, be more level if the fossil-fuel generators had to take care of their own waste. At present, they simply expel it into the atmosphere for us or future generations to deal with. At least the nuclear industry contains and processes its own waste. Surely that is the point of what we are discussing today.

Dr. Turner: I think that one of the best ways to level the playing field is to have a realistic carbon price. We currently have a ludicrous price in the EU emissions trading scheme. I know that one of the things that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State hopes will emerge from Copenhagen is an internationally agreed means of increasing the carbon price.

Mr. Weir: I was somewhat astonished by what the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) said about cost. Would the hon. Gentleman care to remind us of the current cost of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to deal with historical nuclear waste, never mind new nuclear waste?

Dr. Turner: It is about £70 billion, but I have slightly lost track; there is, however, a mounting pile of both waste and cost. I should add that the nuclear industry does not want to know about making a level playing field.

Returning to my theme, the whole process would be made a great deal easier if we had a sensible carbon price. If we had such a carbon price, we would not need to exact as much money through a levy from electricity consumers. It is the electricity consumers who will have to pick up the tab for the levy, and £9.5 billion is quite a lot of money. It could be raised through a carbon tax—that was a Freudian slip. I have long advocated our having a carbon tax, but I should have referred to it being raised through a carbon price—although that does not really matter because a sensible carbon price would, in effect, be a carbon tax, so that is just semantics.

It has now become really quite respectable to suggest that we should have a mechanism for underpinning the price of carbon. That has now been suggested by Lord Turner, chair of the Committee on Climate Change, and by many others. If we had a realistic carbon price, that would help to level the playing field for competition in generation. We need to do that, because it is unrealistic to think we can continue to subsidise everything, as we have to do now to get decarbonised electricity supply.

We cannot do that through regulation because of the liberalised market. We could regulate, however, to say not only that no coal-fired power station will be built without CCS in place, but that there will be no coal-fired generation at all. Under that restriction, only zero or low-carbon generation technologies would be licensed, but we would not get those power stations built, because the capital markets are in such a bad state that no one would invest in them. We are therefore, in effect, having to cough up subsidies to satisfy bankers. It all comes back to bankers—I am sorry to have to say that, but it is true. They want to see returns on their investments, and the only way they can get them is through subsidies: in this case, it would be the CCS levy, and in the case of wind and other renewables, it would be renewables obligation certificates. Either way, there has to be the subsidy.

That brings me on to the first matter that I would have liked the Bill to address. As has been mentioned, we have some of the best raw energy-producing resources of any country in the world in terms of wind, wave and tidal stream, but although some of our wave power and tidal stream technologies are at the point of being ready for commercial exploitation and deployment, that will not happen under our current market support regimes. Even if the double-ROCs for offshore wind could be accessed, it would not be enough because such new technologies have higher capital costs, which can only come down with increased scale, the development of supply chains and so forth.

Other countries, notably Germany and Denmark, have deployed market support systems that will develop technologies so they reach the point of cost reduction. In the process, although such countries may have to invest a bit, they will gain enormously in terms of the green industries they develop. We could have had the wind industry in Britain if we had done that. Like Germany, we might now have had 250,000 extra jobs and several billions of pounds-worth of turnover from the manufacture of wind turbines. We have an opportunity with wave and tidal stream technology, but it will not happen unless we put in place a market support mechanism—to be brutally honest, a subsidy—that will bring that through.

I would have liked to have seen a provision in the Bill to extend the levy principle to support and foster new technologies, because none of the current market support systems are doing the job. We could have a magnificent tidal stream industry in this country, as exemplified by the first commercial machine, SeaGen, in Strangford lough. There is a danger, however, that those involved in the industry will be forced to go to other countries, where there is a market support mechanism.

Mr. Elliot Morley (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good argument. On market mechanisms, does he not agree that we might look back at a previous Bill on feed-in tariffs? I know it depends on the scale of generation, but there is a possibility of helping emerging technologies through the feed-in tariff applied. Although the Department of Energy and Climate Change has put in place a very good tariff structure, is there not an argument for having a higher rate—perhaps only temporarily, for a few years—to encourage those new technologies?

Dr. Turner: I absolutely agree, and I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I do not mind whether the measure in question is called a feed-in tariff, a multiple ROC or a special levy, as long as it does the job. Obviously, it would be temporary and tied to the state of development of a given technology. If we do not do that, however, we run the risk of losing an industry that this country could have—it is on the point of development—and that could produce gigawatts of power that could, in turn, produce great industrial benefit. If that does not happen, we will still want to deploy tidal stream power in this country, because we have so much of it, but instead of being the manufacturer and getting 100 per cent. of the added value of deploying the technology, we would get very little—perhaps about 10 per cent. We would be a client. We would be importing machines made abroad that could have been made in Britain, and we would lose a potentially huge export industry as well.

[Dr. Desmond Turner]

I therefore make the following serious plea: we should examine the possibility of incorporating in the Bill a new support mechanism for emerging technologies, so that we no longer have to try desperately to get the Treasury to agree to tweaking the existing mechanisms. That just is not happening, and that is extremely frustrating for those in the industry, those who want to see it develop, and all of us who want this country to have the low-carbon electricity it can produce for us and the contribution it can make towards our climate change efforts. I think we have now had enough of that whinge, although it is intended to be a very constructive whinge.

It is inevitable that energy prices will increase. I cannot think of a single factor that would bring them down. Oil and gas prices are going up and the recession will not counter that. The general trend is inexorably upwards, just as the general trend in climate change is of global warming and temperatures moving inexorably upwards. It is vital that the increased burden of decarbonising energy is shared reasonably and that it does not fall on the poorest sections of the community, so I very much welcome the social tariff provisions of the Bill. I think that they are long overdue. We need to ensure that they bite the energy companies. It means that the rest of us have to pay, but I have no objection to that. Some of us accept that principle with taxation, although I cannot say that everybody does.

That is vital, but the tariff is not the only thing. Quite a lot has been said already about energy efficiency, and a social tariff regime needs to go hand in hand with increased energy efficiency. Whatever financial difficulties there are, we need to explore alternative mechanisms of ensuring that those people at the lower end of the income spectrum who will benefit from the social tariffs can also benefit from support for increasing the energy efficiency of their homes. That is the other gap in the Bill as I see it. Such an approach will not necessarily involve great expenditure on the part of the Treasury and it can be done by manipulation of the market. I would like to see that explored.

Finally, we come to my concerns about Ofgem. Those who are easily bored might remember that I have been having a pop at Ofgem for many years now, trying to get some responsibility for sustainability into its mandate. Ofgem has resisted that quite strongly. However, my efforts achieved something in 2004, when sustainability was added to the secondary responsibilities of Ofgem—I cannot remember the list of them now, but it was quite long. There it stayed, but it made very little difference to Ofgem's behaviour in practice because Ofgem has focused almost entirely on competition and security of supply up until now. I am very pleased that the Bill puts sustainability and climate change at the top of Ofgem's primary responsibilities.

It will be extremely interesting to watch the behaviour of Ofgem when it has to consider such matters as its primary remit, with everything else following them. That should produce a culture change that is long overdue. Ofgem's role is central to all energy policy, so if it is singing from the climate change hymn sheet, we might see some real progress towards large-scale deployment of renewable energy.

Martin Horwood: I am broadly in sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's argument. It is long overdue that sustainability should take a major place in Ofgem's remit. Is he satisfied with the rather circuitous and convoluted way in which the Bill attempts to do that, by redefining sustainability as one of the consumer benefits?

Dr. Turner: That is an interesting question, but I do not think it matters. The provision states quite clearly that sustainability is a primary part of Ofgem's responsibility and, of course, it is a consumer benefit. Fighting climate change is as much a consumer benefit as anything else. In fact, I think that it is probably one of the greatest benefits that we can give to successive generations of consumers. I do not have a problem with that. As long as Ofgem finally starts to go green, I shall be quite happy.

The other thing that worries me about Ofgem is that, although for years it has been rather tentative in its regulation and how it has tackled abuses of the energy market by energy companies, it needs more powers. Even if it has the will to go in a particular direction of enforcement, it definitely needs more powers. The Bill contains some. Although I have not worked through the issue enough to define the extra powers that I think Ofgem might need, this is one part of the Bill that will need very careful scrutiny in Committee. It could well be expedient to increase further Ofgem's powers beyond those that are already in the Bill.

I endorse the Bill, although I think it can be improved. I realise why it is a modest Bill. It fits within a time setting. It is what it is and can only be what it is. However, even within the limited time that we have left of this Parliament, I think that it can be usefully improved. I sincerely hope that the whole House will at least give it a Second Reading.

7.27 pm

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner).

We have become accustomed to relying on an uninterrupted supply of electricity in this country although, as the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) mentioned and as I also read in a report from the Environmental Audit Committee—in fact, only the Minister has not recognised it—we are heading for a situation in which the lights could well go out in 2017.

Every aspect of our modern life is plugged into the grid. There are usually no back-up arrangements, except perhaps for hospitals or dairy farmers who need to keep their milking machines going. For many vulnerable people and families, the prospect of losing power supplies is a real concern. Even our gas central heating systems and cookers rely on electricity to function, so there will be no Christmas dinner without electricity. In fact, a couple of years ago in my part of north Yorkshire there were power cuts on Christmas day, which created particular problems.

We have identified two serious challenges. The first, as I have mentioned, is security of supply of electricity and gas. The experience in Ukraine a couple of years ago, when Gazprom decided to turn off the supplies, showed that this is all too great a threat for many parts of the world. Of course, the United Kingdom is at the

end of the pipeline, and we have heard it asked whether Germany could pull back supplies that are already in the UK should there be a strategic problem.

The second challenge—and this is the really big one—is CO_2. When the North sea oil and gas run out, our major indigenous supply of energy will be the coal that stretches from under the south Yorkshire area to under my constituency in north Yorkshire to where the Barnsley seam extends.

One decision that the Government have made, which I think was right, is to embark on a new generation of nuclear power stations in this country. I am disappointed that the Liberal Democrats have still got a head-in-the-sand attitude, whether it is out of political opportunism or whether they just sing too much to the tune played by Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. They need to wake up and realise that the nuclear industry has a vital part to play in delivering our CO_2 targets.

Martin Horwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Goodwill: I thought that the hon. Gentleman might intervene.

Martin Horwood: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's contribution to the Liberal Democrat policy debate, but is he aware that no nuclear power station has ever been built on time and to budget and that we are still paying between £1 billion and £2 billion to clean up the last generation of nuclear waste? We have still not found anywhere or anyhow to dispose of the waste from the last 40 years of nuclear waste generation; why on earth would we want to go down that route again?

Mr. Goodwill: If the hon. Gentleman spoke to the Canadians, he would find that they are delivering nuclear power stations to places such as China and Korea to budget and on time. As for legacy waste, much of it has come from our military nuclear developments. The incremental amount of waste that will be produced by the new generation means that that is not an insurmountable problem. I visited a nuclear power station in Canada with some people who had never been in a nuclear power station before and who had no experience of nuclear. When we saw some waste in a tank, they were asked how much they thought there was—a week or a year's supply—but the tank contained the past 15 years-worth of waste. The nuclear industry's waste is manageable.

The hon. Gentleman should speak to the Canadians about how they address their waste problem. They picked the Canadian equivalent of Jonathan Porritt, a lady called Elizabeth Dowdeswell, to set up a commission, and it became apparent that the problem of nuclear waste management and disposal is not a technical or scientific issue but a purely political one, and that courageous decisions have to be taken to enable waste to be managed and for closure on that issue.

Martin Horwood: I have to accept that even a Liberal Democrat Government would have to find some way of managing that waste—that is inevitable, as it is already in existence—but will the hon. Gentleman tell us when, how or where the last generation of nuclear waste will be disposed of? An answer to one of those three questions would do.

Mr. Goodwill: The current generation of power stations has a credible plan to store waste in tanks until it cools down. It could then be transferred to air-cooled silos for 40 or 50 years. In the long term, the answer would be long-term geological storage—not disposal, but storage—because future generations might need to access that nuclear fuel again to use in a new generation of power stations, perhaps in 100 years' time. I believe that the Government have made the right decision in embarking on a new generation of nuclear power stations, although it is true that the nuclear industry in the UK has had a somewhat unfortunate history.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) talked about bumping into nuclear engineers from the UK in different parts of the world. When I was in Canada, I was told that the premier league engineers had been in Britain building our gas-cooled reactor fleet. The theoretical design behind those reactors made them the safest in the world, but the problem lay with the practicalities of building the power stations, particularly as no stations were built to exactly the same design. I think that there was a similar strategy behind the building of Concorde: we thought that we were the best engineers in the world and that we could engineer our way through anything. Perhaps, as lessons were learned, we should have gone down the route of the Americans and French with the pressurised water reactor, which was originally designed to be put into a nuclear submarine or aircraft carrier, as that has turned out to be the most dependable and reliable reactor.

Nuclear has a bright future. The only problem is that the decision to build has been left 10 years too late, and so we might have a problem keeping the lights on in the meantime. Certainly, there is plenty of fuel for the nuclear industry. When I was in Canada, I spoke to representatives of the nuclear uranium mining industry who told me that there was enough fuel for at least 40 years. The problem is that there is no incentive for anyone to prospect for more fuel in places such as Canada and Australia, given that the likely return will be more than 40 years away. Some of the scare stories that have been put about by the Liberal Democrats have more to do with political opportunism than with the best interests of the UK economy and the world climate. It is all very well their saying that renewables are the answer—and they are, absolutely, part of the answer—but so is nuclear. I am pleased that we will have a new generation of nuclear power stations, and I hope that they will be a start. I hope that, in years to come, when we look at future generations, we consider having still more nuclear.

If we get to the point at which nuclear supplies more than just the base load supply, we should look at how the surplus generation can be used. Our coal and gas stations can be turned on and off; at half time in the World cup final, in which I sincerely hope England will be playing, when everyone goes to put the kettle on, those gas and coal stations can be cranked up. The nature of nuclear generation means that those stations have to be on permanently so, looking a little further ahead than the Bill envisages, we should consider ways we can use our successes.

Martin Horwood: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is being very generous, given that I am criticising his points, but I

[Martin Horwood]

cannot let him get away with the idea that nuclear power has ever been on constantly in this country. Can he name any period in which all our nuclear power reactors have been working at once?

Mr. Goodwill: I recall having just mentioned the technical problems that we have had with advanced gas-cooled reactors and that that is why we changed to the technology that the French and Germans developed—the Sizewell technology—which has been proved to be more dependable.

As I was saying, if we have that base load supply at night when people are not boiling kettles, we will have to think about how to deal with that. I read an interesting paper about developing a hydrogen economy. We already have motor cars that will run on hydrogen—BMW and other manufacturers have taken the lead on that. It would certainly be practical to use hydrogen that is generated by electrolysis at night, or by a process that the Americans are looking into of producing hydrogen directly in a reactor core—I get notes from the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed), who knows more about the nuclear industry than I do. It would be practical to pump hydrogen around the existing gas network—hydrogen is a little more porous than the current natural gas that we put in there—and have a hydrogen economy based on our existing gas network. That idea looks a little further ahead than even the Bill envisages, but we do not want to close the door to such ideas.

I welcome the news from the Government about electric cars, and I am sure that even if there were a change of Government, that approach would not change. However, I think that some people are making claims that cannot be substantiated by research or data about how green electric cars are at the moment. I am not sure how green an electric car can be if it is being charged up using coal power, but it is important to allow the industry to develop electric cars because we will in due course have green electricity that they can use. Another issue to consider is smart metering and how car batteries can be used as a resource when they are on charge. We might be able to smooth out some of the peaks in supply and demand by using the resource of all those car batteries, when they are plugged into their chargers, to augment the grid at certain times.

Recently, at Imperial college, London, I looked at some very interesting developments involving fuel cells for domestic use. There was a boiler that looked every bit like the kind of normal combi boiler that we would have in our flats and homes, but it was producing electricity using a fuel cell that used natural gas, and the waste heat that was being produced was not being wasted as it is in big power stations in south Yorkshire, where it goes up as waste heat through cooling towers, but was being used to heat domestic water for the house. I hope that we will see that interesting technology go forward.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Goodwill: The Minister nods. It would be one way of having micro-generation in every home in the country and utilising that waste heat.

It was not clear to me, from the Secretary of State's introductory remarks, whether the research and development that we are embarking on will be kept as a UK possession, or whether we will share around the world the benefits of any new knowledge on carbon capture and storage. I suppose there is a difficult line to tread between allowing the UK to capitalise on and profit from the investment that we will put into that research and allowing the rest of the world, including developing countries, to benefit. Perhaps when she sums up the Minister will give us some idea of how the ownership of that technology, which will be funded partly by the Government but largely by electricity consumers, will benefit the UK. Will she tell us what degree of co-ordination there has been between the major economies, which are all looking into this type of technology, to make sure that we are not duplicating work that is being done elsewhere? Certainly, sequestration and carbon capture and storage are part of the solution. The most wonderful part of that would be an ability to burn biofuels in our power stations, capture the carbon and pump it down into the ground. That would be genuine sequestration: taking CO_2 out of the atmosphere from the biofuels and getting rid of it in a hole in the ground.

I think that there has been an element not of complacency but perhaps of thinking, "Well it's just going to happen. If we throw enough money at this research, it will definitely happen. Whatever research we put in, we'll come up with a solution." Although we could technically come up with a post-combustion or pre-combustion system and make it work, the problem is the cost and the energy loss. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report suggested that there would be a 25 to 40 per cent. energy loss from carrying out such processing of gases. I recall the regulation that we passed more than a decade ago on fuel quality for diesel and petrol vehicles, whereby we took the sulphur out of the diesel and petrol. There was a 10 or 15 per cent. energy loss at the refinery from that. For every environmental step forward, we sometimes have to take a short step back. Of course, a 40 per cent. energy cost in that sort of process will have a severe impact on people's energy bills.

We need to ensure that we are not missing the point on other sorts of technology that we should identify. We have been criticised for missing some of the low-hanging fruit. The proposals of my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) to allow people effectively to borrow against the savings on their bills so that their homes become more fuel efficient seem a sensible way forward. Most businesses are doing that already. If they go to their bank manager with a proposal for investing £100,000 to save £25,000 a year, the bank would go with that. We want that sort of scheme to be extended to ordinary domestic consumers.

We also have a long way to go in heating our homes. We fitted a new central heating system in my home recently and put thermostatic valves on the radiators. However, the bedroom heating does not need to go on till perhaps 9 o'clock at night; the living room heating does not need to go on till 5 o'clock. In many homes, when the heating is on, it is simply on, and people do not go around the house adjusting their thermostatic valves. I hope that we will examine ways in which heating systems in houses can become more intelligent to allow people to make savings.

When I was in Canada, those generating electricity there told me that their peak load is not in winter, but in summer because of air conditioning. I hope that we will examine more carefully ways of using natural ventilation. In Parliament, if one has an office in Portcullis House, it is impossible to open the window. However, I am pleased that the temperature in the Chamber today indicates that we are leading by example in keeping the dial turned down.

My big disappointment with the Bill is that it does not refer to energy from waste through incineration and anaerobic digestion. There was a scheme in my constituency—everybody calls it the Seamer Carr tip; I think the council has a better name—which foundered because of the technology not working. It was a pyrolysis scheme, whereby waste was heated to produce gas, which was burned in an engine. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs put a lot of money into that scheme, which unfortunately did not come to fruition. That is an example of how we cannot always assume that technology will work.

It is interesting to consider other European Union countries, which comply with the landfill directive and incinerate their waste and capture the energy from it rather than continuing to throw it into holes in the ground. I suspect that it will not be long before the European Commission has something to say about that.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): Is it not also important to try to gain the public's confidence about incineration? In south-west London, there is a great deal of controversy about the prospect of the polluting effects of an incinerator. Perhaps more work needs to be done on technology so that people can feel reassured that their environment will not be compromised by such incinerators in urban areas.

Mr. Goodwill: My hon. Friend is right. In Vienna, there is an aesthetically as well as environmentally nice incinerator in the middle of town. People in Austria understand that the standards that the large combustion plants directive imposes on new incinerators mean that they are in more danger from airborne pollution from a neighbour who has a garden fire and throws some plastic or other waste on to it than from a properly run incinerator—not a toxic waste incinerator, but a normal domestic waste incinerator. We face quite a challenge in persuading people that such incinerators are not a threat to their health or their children's health. Indeed, it is a sensible method of harnessing the energy in waste in a way that will save not only the planet but their bills.

Some local authorities—certainly in the borough of Scarborough in my constituency—go for recycling targets by, for example, targeting green waste, which many people previously simply composted in their gardens. That has increased the mass of waste that has been collected. The local authority also collects a lot of unseparated waste—thereby creating costs—which people would previously have perhaps taken to a collection area, where they could separate it themselves. The value of waste has been somewhat compromised by the wish to increase weight rather than value. We need to consider the incineration of waste and take the people with us to persuade them that it is a good thing for their community and the environment. The other way we can get energy from waste is through anaerobic digestion.

Although I welcome the Bill, it is the sort of step in the right direction that a person takes when their shoe laces are tied together. I hope that we will have the opportunity in Committee to improve the measure and make it more fit for purpose.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I reassure hon. Members that the temperature in the Chamber is not cool because the authorities and I are not trying to improve it. We have closed windows and are doing our best to increase the temperature so that it is a little more comfortable.

7.47 pm

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful and informed contribution of the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill), who made some relevant points.

Like the Bill, I will be mercifully brief. I declare an interest at the outset, as I will mention nuclear power and the nuclear industry throughout my contribution. You would be surprised if I did not, Madam Deputy Speaker. Sellafield is in my constituency and I therefore declare rather more than my interest: I declare around 17,000 interests—the number of jobs that it provides in my constituency and in west Cumbria, including for many of my family and friends. I am a former employee of the site—a third-generation nuclear worker

The Bill does not specifically affect nuclear generation. Many hon. Members have pointed out that previous Bills have attended to that. However, the measure raises issues, particularly on public subsidy, which are germane to future electricity generation from nuclear and other sources.

Before I continue, I thank the hon. Member for Bournemouth East, (Mr. Ellwood) for saying that Cumbria is open for business. We were badly affected by the floods. Our economy relies very much on tourism, and the roads, hotels, hostels and guesthouses are open. Please come and spend money there this Christmas.

There is a limit to how far we can play the blame game. There has been some of that in the Chamber this evening about specific elements of policy, in particular how we have arrived at the current nuclear policy. Having said that, the genesis of the malaise in the nuclear industry, which we have begun to remedy, is in the previous Government's failure to address the long-term waste disposal issues. I think that we have resolved that with the laudable and overdue creation of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and the effective prosecution of a properly informed, thoughtful, well-understood long-term radioactive waste management policy for this country. That commands support from hon. Members of all parties.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) raised the issue of nuclear fuel, and the environmental consequences and security of supply issues affecting the new generation of nuclear reactors in this country. The answer is very simple: we already reprocess our spent fuel and, moreover, we continue to manufacture fuel in my constituency at Sellafield and at the Westinghouse facility at Springfields.

[Mr. Jamie Reed]

I shall make a brief pitch for something for which I have been pushing for four and a half years. There are 40,000 tonnes of uranium oxide—that is a commodity, not waste—and 100,000 tonnes of plutonium oxide, which is also a commodity and not waste. If we turn those materials into fuel, not only do we obviate the need to dispose of them, saving £3 billion to £4 billion, but we could run three new nuclear reactors at Sellafield over a 60-year period, eliminating the need to emit more than 0.5 million tonnes of CO_2 in the same period while providing 6 per cent. of the UK's electricity-based generation. That is a prize worth pursuing. In addition, we could provide perhaps the most comprehensive and effective way for the nation to meet its non-proliferation targets. That policy should be championed by any Government of any colour in future.

With that in mind, I welcome the Bill's main objectives. The establishment of carbon capture and storage technology—and consequently ours, and the world's, ability to reduce emissions of CO_2—the protection of millions of customers from energy price exploitation, and much-needed steps to end fuel poverty are at the heart of the Bill. It is a scandal in the world's fourth largest economy, at the beginning of the 21st century, that anyone in the UK should be affected by, or live in, fuel poverty. It is even more distressing to note that, inevitably, it is the least well-off, including thousands of elderly people, who find themselves in fuel poverty for lack of what is a basic essential need. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) pointed out, the days of cheap energy are well and truly over, so it is right for the Government to mandate energy companies to discount bills for some people on the lowest incomes.

I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for taking up cudgels against electricity providers. That has been mentioned fleetingly, but I believe that he was right to intervene. His intervention was significant, and will be welcomed by people living in fuel poverty. As has been said, about 1 million households receive discounts and other help with their energy bills. However, that voluntary arrangement will end in March 2011. The Bill will ensure that when it does so, discounts for the most vulnerable will continue in law through compulsory social programmes, which should be welcomed by Members on both sides on the House.

It is right that we should spend more to take people out of fuel poverty, and I welcome the fact that new resources will be targeted at the most vulnerable consumers. I have mentioned the elderly, and I pay tribute to Age Concern for its interest in this issue over many years and its advocacy on behalf of elderly people in fuel poverty. Not only is it morally and socially right that we attend to the most vulnerable people in fuel poverty—as I have said, very often they are elderly people—but I am sure that there is a body of work about to be done somewhere demonstrating the value to the nation in policy areas such as the NHS of taking elderly people out of fuel poverty. It must be significant, and somewhere there must be a figure that we can put on that.

It must also be said that the fight against fuel poverty is a real test of the deregulated market. Historically, consumers have benefited financially from increased competition driving down the unit price of electricity. I do not think that anyone would doubt that, but in recent years the deregulated market has not so much driven down prices as resembled a multinational cartel. I am not suggesting for a second that the creation of fuel poverty was ever an aim of the market or of its constituent parts, but it is a consequence of the way in which it has conducted itself in recent years.

There are two alternatives to that model: first, the complete re-regulation of the energy markets, which may well be the inevitable consequence of continued failure; and secondly, the creation of a stronger regulator, with more socially responsible practices deployed by the energy utility companies, and a stronger framework established by Government designed to protect the most vulnerable consumers—not quite a public-private partnership, but not far from one. That is what the Bill strives to achieve, and I support it.

The House should make no mistake: the strength of feeling about fuel poverty is such that unless that second alternative works, re-regulation will become a necessity. This is the last chance for the energy utilities to prove that the current model of regulation can be effective and even beneficial, so I urge them to make it work. They must not follow the route of the banks. If the market cannot deliver for the people of this country, we will have no choice but to intervene.

Carbon capture and storage is a phenomenally important issue, and a great deal has been said about it today. If that technology can be proven to work, it may well rank in importance alongside the invention of the internal combustion engine, the advent of powered flight and the splitting of the atom. Given the nature of the challenges posed to human life by climate change, it may in time prove to be even more important than any of those landmark achievements. Again, it is right for Government to facilitate CCS. The Bill will introduce a financial support mechanism for up to four commercial-scale demonstration projects for CCS, and it will also permit the retrofit of additional CCS capacity for those projects, should it be required in future.

The benefits of CCS, as we have heard, are enormous. It will create truly green jobs. In the UK, 30,000 to 60,000 jobs in engineering, manufacturing and procurement will be created by 2030. It will leverage investment for the UK, and could create £2 billion to £4 billion a year for the economy, or a total of £20 billion to £40 billion between 2010 and 2030. It will develop a genuinely new industry for Britain, thus providing a massive regional opportunity for Tyneside, Teesside, the Thames Gateway, the firth of Forth, the Humber, Merseyside and other locations with industry sources that are CO_2-intensive, and offer a great opportunity for the establishment of British CCS business centres. In my view, those are jobs in the right areas.

CCS will also bring an end to unabated coal. The conditions that the Government propose are the most environmentally ambitious of any country in the world, and it is right that at the advent of the Copenhagen conference we should lead. Our plans will make the UK a world leader in technology that will help us to avoid the most severe effects of climate change. Something that has not been mentioned is the fact that CCS technology could be of real benefit in helping to facilitate or smooth the transition to a post-oil economy. When, inevitably, we begin to exploit tar and oil shale reserves and so on, CCS technology will be vital in enabling us to use them.

I fear, however, that the public at large do not yet know enough about CCS. I am concerned that there is a belief that CCS is a panacea or a silver bullet for the climate change challenge facing us all, but it is not like that. The Government are right to support and subsidise CCS, as it is a strategic and environmental necessity for the nation. Again, I draw a comparison with the nuclear industry.

CCS must command well-understood public support, so there is a job of work to be done. In many ways, as the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby suggested, the challenges of CCS make the challenges of radioactive waste disposal look like a walk in the park. We know a great deal about radioactive wastes—their properties, their effects, their half-lives, how to contain them, for how long, and the costs and engineering challenges associated with containment. As much as I support CCS, can we really say the same of it right now? How and where will carbon be stored? What are the public liability implications? How will it affect the unit price of electricity? What are the effects of storage on the environment? What would happen in the event of a leak or catastrophic failure? We must address all those questions, because CCS is too important to fail. However, it does not follow that it will succeed just because we want it to. Nevertheless, the signs are encouraging.

I support the necessary subsidy of CCS, and I place on record that I support subsidy in principle for any technology that will help us to ensure the security of our energy supplies and help us to combat climate change. Let me be explicit. If it is necessary, I would agree with state support for the nuclear industry and all aspects of it—although I do not believe it is necessary. I refer to power generation, fuel reprocessing, fuel manufacture, waste disposal and decommissioning. Will such an approach work? Ask the French.

The Secretary of State heads for Copenhagen well armed, able to demonstrate leadership and able to make British industry central to whatever policy initiatives and agreements emerge. We should all support him in doing so. These issues require cross-party political consensus, so it is a matter of regret that so many front-line Conservative figures are leading what can only be called a counter-revolution in the scientific and political consensus regarding climate change. It beggars belief that the Leader of the Opposition will not publicly denounce these senior figures in his party and his hand-picked non-dom environmental policy advisers, who have holed his attempted rebrand below the waterline—the rising waterline.

Instead of supporting the Government in an effective and non-partisan fashion for the benefit of the planet and entirely within the national interest, the Leader of the Opposition is presiding over a party that increasingly believes that the established science which attributes climate change to manmade activities is a sham. It is worse than neo-conservative flat earth science. So obsessed are they, many of them, with the size of government that they do not believe that the Government can achieve any good, even when the future of the planet depends upon it. That is not a philosophy. It is an illness. The right hand does not seem to know what the extreme right hand is doing.

The Leader of the Opposition currently resembles the Quisling of the climate change deniers, so if he seriously wants to bridge the chasm between his rhetoric and the reality of so many in his party, he should have the basic decency and courage to do that publicly. We need a consensus or else we invite failure. If we fail—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I am not very happy about the word that the hon. Gentleman has just used. Perhaps he would like to withdraw it.

Mr. Reed: Which word in particular, Mr. Deputy Speaker? *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Is the hon. Gentleman not aware of the word that I am talking about?

Mr. Reed: I am afraid not, sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: He might consider withdrawing the word "Quisling".

Mr. Reed: Absolutely, sir.

If we fail, our children will never forget and they will never forgive.

8.2 pm

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): Before those somewhat churlish closing remarks, I was going to say what a great pleasure it was to follow the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed), who speaks with great knowledge of the nuclear industry.

As many other Members have pointed out, it is not wholly coincidental that we are debating the Second Reading of the Bill on the first day of the Copenhagen summit on climate change, which has been described by some as the most important conference in human history. Although there may be some hyperbole in that description—I seem to recall that Yalta was quite important—the question of climate change is certainly the dominant one for our generation. Notwithstanding the local difficulties at the university of East Anglia's climatic research unit, it is clear to most sensible commentators that the world's climate is indeed changing. Whether climate change is caused by human activity is still a matter for debate.

A few years ago I was fortunate enough to pay a visit to the Argonne national laboratory in Chicago. My visit and the presentation that I received there left me in no doubt whatever that since mass industrialisation, the world's climate has warmed and is continuing to warm significantly. I, for one, am entirely satisfied that human activity is contributing significantly to global warming, and it is clear that for the sake of future generations we must take what action we can to attempt to slow that process and to adapt to it.

As other hon. Members have pointed out, however, the Government have been somewhat slow to respond to this phenomenon. Given that some 47 per cent. of carbon emissions are produced in energy generation, the Government's energy policy was for many years timid, with a refusal, for example, to accept and recognise the urgent need to replace our ageing fleet of nuclear power stations. Very late in the day they have recognised that nuclear generation should be an important part of the energy mix of this country, and that it will be necessary to build new nuclear reactors.

[Mr. David Jones]

The Government's slowness in recognising that fact means that there will be a hiatus of many years between the closure of our last remaining nuclear stations and the commissioning of the new ones. During that time the country will be prone to serious power cuts, and when the lights go off, the British people will remember who is responsible for that.

Nevertheless, there are signs in the Bill that the Government have belatedly recognised that security of supply should be central to our energy policy. To that extent, I welcome the amendments in clauses 16 and 17, which provide that the principal objective of both the Secretary of State and Ofgem is to protect the interests of consumers in relation to gas and electricity—interests which include the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases, and security of supply. Indeed, security of supply must be a prime objective.

With the depletion of North sea oil and gas and the decline in our nuclear generating capability, it is all the more important to ensure that our supply of gas and electricity is as secure as it may be. This will undoubtedly mean employing various fuels for the generation of electricity, including nuclear, gas, conventional fossil fuels and renewables.

We in Wales have a significant interest in all matters relating to energy, which is perhaps unsurprising, given that we are sitting on large coal reserves, are in a particularly windy part of the country, and have coastlines that lend themselves to the production of tidal power, to say nothing of the fact that we are on the coast of the Severn estuary. We also have one of the last remaining operational nuclear power stations, at Wylfa, and I was pleased to see that only last month the Secretary of State indicated that Wylfa was a preferred location for one of the new fleet of nuclear power stations.

We also have Trawsfynydd, which is in the process of decommissioning, and which I have visited. It provides an example of an impressive exercise in the handling of a retired nuclear power station. I was told by the work force there that one of the things they would like most of all in that area is another nuclear power station, because nuclear power stations provide high-value jobs in areas where frequently there is no other work at all.

We also have the Dinorwig and Ffestiniog pump storage schemes. I am sure many hon. Members have visited those schemes. They are remarkable feats of engineering, able to fire up from complete shutdown in 12 seconds, giving an enormous and reliable boost to the energy supply in the grid.

Some three years ago, the Welsh Affairs Committee conducted an important inquiry into energy in Wales, and produced a follow-up report a couple of years later. Those reports were important contributions to the debate on energy production in this country, and I commend both of them to hon. Members. Some of the themes touched on by the Committee in its inquiry have to some extent been addressed by the Government and feature in the Bill. In particular, I welcome the proposals to take forward the development of carbon capture and storage technology, as set out in part 1.

Coal is an important resource for future generation in the UK. However, it is clear that if we accept, as I believe we must, that emissions from conventional power stations are contributing significantly to global warming, the problem of those emissions must be addressed.

The Select Committee on Science and Technology has indicated that in the long term, some 85 per cent. of carbon dioxide emissions could be stored safely through the development of carbon capture and storage technology, so it is highly desirable to do as much as we can to develop that. We are fortunate in this country in that we already have significant expertise in exploiting the North sea's resources, which themselves could be turned to the development of CCS technology. Exhausted wells in the North sea could also prove to be ideal locations for the storage of captured carbon. The Government therefore need to press on with the development of CCS technology, and I welcome the Bill to the extent that, in its own faltering way, it provides the launch pad for that development.

However, I have concerns about how CCS will be funded. My constituency—indeed, much of Wales—is largely rural, and I know from conversations with constituents that fuel poverty is a significant concern. Indeed, it has been estimated that more than 740,000 rural households in the UK live in fuel poverty, and that amounts to about 8 per cent. of rural households. Further, some 42 per cent. of rural households are not connected to the gas mains, as compared with only 8 per cent. of households in urban areas. As a consequence, many rural households rely upon liquified petroleum gas or fuel oil to heat their homes, and the Commission for Rural Communities has estimated that heating a three-bedroom house in the countryside costs some £1,300 per annum using LPG and £1,044 using domestic fuel oil, as against only £568 using mains gas.

Clause 4 provides that CCS demonstration projects will be funded by a levy on electricity suppliers. As other hon. Members have said, that levy will undoubtedly be passed on to consumers in the form of higher electricity prices, and although the levy will affect all consumers, it will have a disproportionate affect on rural households, which already pay considerably more than urban households to heat their homes. Clause 4(4) provides that the Secretary of State may make regulations exempting certain types of electricity suppliers from the levy, so I ask the Secretary of State to consider the disproportionate impact that electricity price increases will have on rural consumers, particularly because they will not benefit from the schemes in part 2 for reducing fuel poverty, because those do not apply to either LPG or fuel oil.

Returning to clause 17, I should say that the new statutory focus on greenhouse gas emissions will, or should, clearly lead to the development of new sources of renewable energy. At the moment, the principal form of renewable energy in Wales, as indeed in most of the rest of the country, is wind power. There is no doubt that wind should form part of an energy mix, but it is illusory to suggest that it can ever constitute a reliable form of base load generation. Its efficiency—at some 27 per cent. as opposed to nuclear power's 95 per cent.—is worryingly low, and the reasons why are obvious: wind by its nature is intermittent, and when the wind does not blow the turbines do not turn.

Wind can at best, therefore, constitute only an ancillary source of generation. However, in Wales and many other parts of the country, wind appears to be the only form of renewable generation that is being pursued, and

the inherent hazardousness of that is self-evident. During the five coldest days last winter, very few turbines turned, and those days were just the period when we needed as much electricity as possible. The reason why they did not turn is quite simple: a large anticyclone was sitting over the British Isles, and as every schoolboy knows, anticyclones in winter tend to produce cold conditions without wind.

Nevertheless, wind farms continue to be built, and that is a significant phenomenon in Wales, where the Welsh Assembly Government's infamous technical advice note 8 provides a planning presumption in favour of wind farm development in the so-called strategic search areas, which tend to be located, interestingly enough, on Forestry Commission land, the rental income of which passes to the Welsh Assembly Government. Consequently, large areas of Welsh upland are being progressively colonised by wind turbines.

Indeed, the Hiraethog area of my constituency contains numerous small wind farms that have been consented to under town and country planning legislation. RWE npower renewables, however, now has plans to build in the Clocaenog forest a wind farm with an output of more than 50 MW, for which an application will soon be made to the Department of Energy and Climate Change under the provisions of the Electricity Act 1989. If that is consented to, the cumulative impact of development on the Hiraethog area will be to turn a beautiful rural landscape into an industrialised one—for a source of generation that is only 27 per cent. efficient.

Part of the problem is the way in which renewables obligation certificates are structured, a point that the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) touched on briefly. ROCs are a very blunt instrument that reward the developers of wind farms at precisely the same rate as the developers of other renewable technologies—with one certificate per megawatt-hour. The Department has proposals for banding ROCs to encourage the development of other forms of renewable technology. However, wind farms would still have the benefit of one ROC per megawatt-hour under the Government's new proposals. That is particularly worrying, because other forms of renewable technology, if exploited, could prove significantly more efficient than wind.

In that respect, I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. He mentioned tidal power, which offers the most obvious advantages. The tide, after all, ebbs and flows with absolute predictability twice a day, every day, and Wales has many locations where tidal stream technology and tidal lagoon technology could be developed commercially. Swansea bay and Kimmel bay, which is off the coast of my constituency, offer particularly exciting potential for the development of tidal lagoons.

Indeed, evidence taken by the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs indicated that the Kimmel bay site had a potential generating capacity of 432 MW, which is by any standards a significant power station. However, ROCs have hitherto not differentiated between the various forms of renewable technology, so developers have tended to opt for the low-hanging fruit of wind turbines, with all their inherent unreliability, as opposed to tide. The Department's proposed re-banding will not settle that.

Wind turbines are relatively cheap and easy to construct, so developers will continue to opt for them, but the Government should reconsider their proposal for the banding of renewables obligation certificates as a matter of some urgency, so as positively to encourage the development of new technologies.

As other Members have said, this Bill is a step in the right direction, but it is a somewhat timid and faltering one. The Government need to be bolder and to act more quickly and decisively. Twelve years have elapsed, and only now are we really getting to grips with a problem that will affect our children very significantly indeed. We need to develop the nuclear power stations and to facilitate development of the reliable renewable technologies that the country needs. I believe that this will be done, but that the Government who achieve it will be a Conservative one.

8.19 pm

Nick Ainger (Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): I was interested to hear what the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Jones) said about wind energy, in particular. As one who also represents a rural constituency, I understand the concerns that many residents have about the impact of wind turbines on the landscape. However, we have to accept that this is a proven technology and that many other countries have developed their wind industries in areas that are important to their citizens in terms of landscape value. Perhaps the way forward is a policy that states that the wind industry should not develop in national parks and areas of outstanding beauty, but that elsewhere we must accept compromises because ultimately they give us the prize of low-carbon, low-emission generation. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about its efficiency compared with base-load generation, whether in nuclear, gas or coal, but we must accept that it was never intended as a base-load form of generation.

I was somewhat concerned by the references to security of supply made by Conservative Front Benchers and several Conservative Back Benchers. What is missing from their equation is what is already happening in relation to the building of new generation facilities. In my constituency, the construction of a 2,000 MW gas-fired power station is under way. There is Staythorpe, a large gas-fired power station in Nottingham, and another such facility in Plymouth. Some Conservative Members gave the impression that the Government have done nothing, not recognising that the large combustion plant directive means that several coal-fired power stations will have to close because they have reached their decommissioning date, and several nuclear power stations will be phased out as well. Several projects are already in the pipeline and under construction. There is also a substantial expansion in wind generation, particularly offshore, which the Government were right to encourage. The offshore wind industry will start to deal with the problem of renewables development, which we must accept has been too slow in this country. It also presents many opportunities, not only for CO_2 reductions in our own economy, but through the expertise that Britain has developed, particularly in our offshore oil industry. There are real opportunities for British companies to develop offshore wind farms around the world.

Another aspect of security of supply, which was not mentioned by Conservative Front Benchers or anyone else, is what has happened in the new market that has developed for liquefied natural gas. At Milford Haven, there are now two large LNG terminals which together can supply 30 per cent. of the UK market for gas—just

[Nick Ainger]

from one part of Wales. The development of a new LNG terminal at the Isle of Grain provides further opportunities for substantial imports from—in terms of the middle east—relatively stable regions. We also import gas in LNG form from the Caribbean. There are already several developments taking place that will provide us with security of supply in the gas industry. Unlike continental Europe, which has very little indigenous gas supply, we have had North sea gas. Basically, the industry grew on the back of that and used those gas fields as a storage facility. We are now moving on: supply from the North sea is declining and we must depend on imports. I emphasise that we import our LNG from stable areas, unlike continental Europe, which has depended on a Russian gas supply that, sadly, has been unpredictable, let us say, in recent times. That is why continental Europe has such substantial storage capacity—it is aware of that instability in its source of supply.

I welcome the Bill. The fact that we are now legislating for essential new technology indicates that the market has not worked. The science and technology behind carbon capture and storage is not new, but ways of converting it to a practical form, so that it can work in large coal or even gas-fired power stations, have yet to be developed and proved. It is clear that the market was not prepared to take the risk of such a development on its own, and given those circumstances it is right that the Government have said that this is an absolutely essential technological development, and we have to support it.

A number of Members asked whether it was fair to expect those who are on a green electricity tariff to make a contribution in their bills to the development of CCS. As the hon. Member for Clwyd, West said, the green tariff source of energy is not available to some people. Whether electricity is from a coal, nuclear or gas-fired station or a wind turbine, it all comes down the same cable at the end, so the idea that the contribution should be across the board is a relatively fair and reasonable compromise.

We should be saying to the industry now that we are going to set carbon emission targets for future new generation. As I am sure many Members did, I received a briefing from a number of organisations, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, arguing that the Bill should include a mandatory emissions performance standard for any new applications for fossil fuel power stations. That is a reasonable concept, because at the moment the large combustion plant directive means that generators know that they have to meet certain standards on emissions of sulphur dioxide, nitrous oxide and so on to prevent acid rain and other pollution. We should say to them now, "If you build any fossil fuel power station, we will set a mandatory emissions standard that you will have to meet." We should give them notice of that.

In my constituency, RWE npower has started building a large, 2,000 MW power station. During the planning process, the Countryside Council for Wales expressed concern that the waste cooling water that would be taken from Milford Haven, then returned there having gone through the plant, could cause environmental problems. The solution that it suggested would have required the construction of cooling towers. Although they would have been electric-powered, rather than the traditional very large ones that give off a plume of steam, the power station would have been significantly less efficient and its CO_2 emissions would actually have increased. In trying to address one environmental problem, we create another.

If, right from the word go, an emission performance standard had been set for the amount of CO_2 per kilowatt-hour generated, perhaps the company could have come up with an alternative use for the excess heat from the waste water. To be fair to the company, it is now trying to deal with the problem. It is considering developing, with another partner, large glasshouses for the production of fruit and vegetables or flowers. That interesting suggestion could perhaps be explored in Committee.

I intervened on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to ask about social tariffs. I welcome the fact that we are now moving to mandatory schemes. The arrangements that have been made with some companies are welcome, but the identification of those who should, in my view, be eligible for social tariffs, is a major problem. Many such people are on benefits, and when it comes to identifying them, there are data protection issues. The fact that there will now be a mandatory scheme will hopefully encourage the Department for Work and Pensions to become involved in the decisions about who qualifies.

There are two issues related to social tariffs. First companies currently give social tariffs almost exclusively to pensioners, but Citizens Advice has informed us that not many pensioners remain in fuel poverty because of the effect of the winter fuel allowance. However, significant numbers of younger people, certainly below pensioner age and some who have children, go to citizens advice bureaux with major problems with fuel debt. It is fair to assume that if people have problems with fuel debt, they have problems with fuel poverty. It would therefore appear that a significant number of people who would benefit from a social tariff—perhaps a significant majority—cannot currently access one.

I hope that any mandatory scheme will definitely include those younger people. For example, a single pensioner on pension credit receives £130 and under-80s also qualify for the £250 winter fuel allowance, but a single person aged 50 on long-term incapacity benefit would have a total weekly income of £91.80, no winter fuel allowance and the same sorts of needs. There is also a very strong argument behind the Macmillan campaign for assisting those with cancer, to which hon. Members have referred.

The second issue, which has also been referred to by hon. Members, is that 4,300,000 households are not connected to the mains gas system and depend on heating oil or LPG for their central heating and hot water. A number of figures have been bandied about, but Citizens Advice estimates that someone who is not connected to the mains gas system has an average fuel bill of £1,700, whereas those who are connected to the mains gas system have bills of just under £1,200—approximately £500 difference, or £10 a week, purely because people have no connection to the mains system.

The sale and distribution of LPG and heating oil are not regulated, but they should be. We are talking about a significant number of people—4,300,000 households, almost exclusively in rural areas. It is the oil companies

that are supplying the distributors of LPG and heating oil, so I do not see why they cannot be regulated for that part of their business by Ofgem. The mandatory social tariff should also be available to those people who are dependent on LPG and heating oil. I hope that in Committee we can make that happen. It is essential, as a matter of fairness, that we do so, given that the average consumer in a rural area has to pay at least £10 a week more than the average urban consumer. That is wrong, and we need to address the issue, especially for those families and individuals on low incomes.

I am glad that clauses 16, 17 and 18 will change the responsibilities and duties of Ofgem, and I hope that part of its responsibility will stretch to transmission capacity. Areas such as Wales have a strong electricity distribution system in the north and in the south, but very little in the middle, and wind farm developers are having a real problem—not in finding the funding to invest in building the turbines, but in obtaining a connection to the national grid. The hopes of achieving a significant offshore wind industry, especially down the west coast of both Wales and England—and Scotland, although I do not wish to speak for Scotland—depend on a submarine cable network. I hope that the Bill will provide sufficient powers to ensure that such development takes place as quickly as possible, so that we can take advantage of the major opportunities that it will bring. The regular wind provided by nature down our west coast should be exploited, and the main stumbling block appears to be the connection with the national grid.

I welcome the Bill, and I hope that it can be improved along the lines that I and other hon. Members have suggested. I hope that the Minister of State, who will take the Bill through Committee, will be able to accommodate some of the sensible suggestions that have been made in the debate so far.

8.39 pm

Mr. Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): In this debate, we have had a canter around various parts of energy policy and climate change. It has been said that this is a modest Bill, but it is an important one that covers three distinct areas that impact on us all. Indeed, the Bill impacts on some issues that I have spent many happy hours debating in the Chamber over the years.

Part 1 deals with the framework for establishing carbon capture and storage, which follows the Budget announcement in April of

"a new funding mechanism to support up to four carbon capture and storage demonstration projects, and £90 million to fund detailed preparatory studies."

The original carbon capture and storage project, or contest, seems to have been grinding on for some considerable time. The hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) was on the mark when he said that the rules seemed to keep changing. A shiver ran up my spine when the Secretary of State mentioned a contest for the remaining three projects. I hope that they will be an awful lot quicker than the contest we are going through, although better late than never.

Ministers are keen on telling us about our world leadership in carbon capture and storage technology, although sadly I doubt whether that is entirely correct now. We had an excellent opportunity to be in the lead with the proposed development of the gas station in Peterhead, but unfortunately that was lost, owing to endless dithering by the Government, and the project is now proceeding in Abu Dhabi. It appears that the reason the Government did not want to proceed with that project was that they wished instead to concentrate on pre-combustion processes, which they hoped would lead to an export industry, particularly to developing nations such as China. Unfortunately, that dithering led to China developing its own industry. Indeed, one of the few commercial projects that is up and running is the one in Beijing. We could end up importing such technology instead of being in the lead, and if we had developed it in the first place, we could well be in the lead.

Peterhead could also have helped to develop a method that would have been of particular benefit to the UK, as it would have allowed gas stations to de-carbonise and the carbon to be stored in the North sea's depleted oil and gas reserves. Sadly, it appears that the prejudice against gas continues, as I note that clause 6 defines a CCS demonstration project as

"a project to demonstrate and assess carbon capture and storage technology through its use in commercial coal-fired electricity generation".

Gas seems to be specifically excluded by that definition. I wonder whether the Minister could explain in summing up why gas is excluded and why only coal is to be helped by the scheme. That point was also raised with the Secretary of State, who said that gas could come in further downstream, but we already have a lot of gas-fired stations and we still have a lot of gas in the UK continental shelf, although obviously it is diminishing. It therefore seems crazy not at least to look at the prospects of carbon capture and storage for gas, and instead of putting all our eggs in the basket of coal, important though that is.

That said, CCS provides an important opportunity. I strongly support the claim of the Longannet project, which is being developed in Fife, as a strong candidate for help from the scheme, especially given its proximity to the North sea and the ability, therefore, to enable the current infrastructure of the North sea oil and gas industry to be utilised in the development of CCS. The hon. Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire (Nick Ainger) made the good point that the oil and gas industry could develop to include aspects of CCS. There is a huge opportunity to ensure the transfer of those skills to new industries after the run-down of oil and gas, as many of them will be useful in CCS, particularly if it is developed by storing the carbon under the North sea.

The Scottish CO_2 study has concluded that there is a possibility that the North sea could store up to 200 years of CO_2 emissions, bringing in a huge amount of work and billions of pounds to the economy over a long time. Indeed, the EU is interested in a North sea grid to help to develop CCS and seize the potential for development in the old oil and gas fields and the saline aquifers. However, that brings up another issue that is not covered in the Bill and that the Government will need to address: how do we ensure that the North sea infrastructure is in place to enable that development to happen?

Much of the existing infrastructure of the oil and gas industry is now becoming fairly elderly. As the main fields in the North sea begin to wind down, there is a danger of losing that essential infrastructure unless

[Mr. Mike Weir]

action is taken to ensure that it is retained. Many of the new discoveries in the North sea are of much smaller fields, where the oil and gas industry perhaps needs a different set of infrastructure, but what is now in place for the depleted fields could be important for CCS. Given that we are probably still a decade away from the technology becoming commercially viable, will the Minister tell us whether either the Department of Energy and Climate Change or the Treasury have been in discussions with the oil and gas industries to try to agree on a regime that would ensure that that infrastructure is maintained and available for CCS?

Part 2 deals with fuel poverty, an issue in which I have taken a great interest over the years. I hope that many of these measures will be entirely non-controversial. I warmly welcome the efforts to replace the existing voluntary schemes operated by the energy companies with a mandatory scheme. That is welcome and long overdue. One of the great problems with the existing system has been the bewildering variety of schemes that have been marketed by the energy companies. It is sometimes difficult for people to find out what the best social scheme for them might be. The new system should be much simpler for consumers, and will be a huge improvement.

Like many other Members, however, I regret that a vital element among the fuel poor has once again been omitted from the statutory regime—namely, those who rely on liquefied petroleum gas or home fuel oil to heat their homes. The Bill specifically defines the suppliers as electricity and mains gas suppliers. I appreciate that there are difficulties with the LPG and home oil market. There has been a Competition Commission inquiry into this matter, which ran for years and came to no real conclusions. The market is much more complex than that for electricity and gas supplies, which contains only a limited number of large companies, but this is none the less a serious issue for its customers. Many of them live in rural areas, where the gas mains will never reach, and their choices are very limited indeed.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire mentioned the difference in cost between the average mains gas bill and the average home fuel or LPG bill, but another factor that works against consumers in this market is that the problem is exacerbated by the fact that many face minimum delivery amounts. This means that they sometimes have to pay substantial sums up front in order to get a delivery of fuel. Those on low incomes—many of whom live in rural areas, and suffer disguised rural poverty—suffer particularly badly because of this. They simply do not have the funds to pay up front for large amounts of fuel oil. This can lead to their being unable to get the fuel, and unable to heat their homes. That is unacceptable in this day and age.

I appreciate that efforts are being made to get alternatives such as small-scale renewables to those consumers, but again there is a problem of cost. Many small-scale renewables, such as heat pumps, are very expensive and therefore outwith the reach of many people, even with the grants that are available. I agree with the hon. Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire that it is simply wrong that that group of people do not have the same access to social tariffs as those on mains supplies. Ministers must look again at this issue, which has plagued the whole fuel poverty debate for a considerable time. This is discrimination, pure and simple, against those people who are fuel-poor in rural areas. We must do something about this, and ensure that they get the same benefit as those who live in towns and can access mains gas. I also echo what has been said by others about those with long-term medical conditions who need more heat.

One of the impacts of ensuring that we meet our carbon targets and improve our infrastructure is that increasing amounts of subsidy are being paid by consumers through their energy bills. Centrica is the first to put a percentage on that, but I am sure that the other companies will do so. The CCS levy will inevitably be another part of that, as will all the other subsidies that are coming through.

People who do not benefit from the various tariffs or the winter fuel subsidy are going to find it increasingly difficult. It is simply unfair that those who require more heat because of long-term medical conditions do not get the help available to pensioners. Again, that must be looked at—as was said earlier, energy bills are not going to go down in the near future. Indeed, when Ofgem was before the Select Committee last week, I believe it said that up to 20 per cent. of the bill could come from various subsidies within a few years. That is a worrying statistic for those who have to pay the full amount of their electricity bills.

Part 3 deals with the change to the regulation of gas and electricity markets and the role of Ofgem. In my time in the House, I have had many spirited discussions with Ofgem about its actions, particularly regarding the hoary old issue of transmission charges. It has always seemed to me that Ofgem had a totally blinkered attitude defined by its ideological interpretation of its principal duty to look at the interests of consumers. That seemed to give it the idea that all generation should be based near the main centres of population, which meant that many renewable energy developments in the more remote areas of Scotland—having listened to the hon. Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire, I appreciate that this may also be a problem in Wales—where much of the wind and many of the waves actually are, faced very discriminatory transmission and access charges over the years to be able to get into the grid and transport the energy to market.

I appreciate that the Secretary of State is taking powers, which deals to some extent with the access charge problem, but there is still a transmission charge problem, although it has been slowly improving. I very much hope that the changes brought about by clause 17, which ensures that climate change and security of supply will become much more important for Ofgem to consider in coming to its decisions, will mean that much of the ideological baggage of the past will have to be jettisoned. I would caution, however, that before this can be done, there will have to be a major cultural change at Ofgem. It is one thing to put these clauses in the Bill, but strong action is needed to ensure that they are given the required weight in Ofgem's decisions. The recent report that Ofgem was seeking to undermine the introduction of feed-in tariffs is a matter of huge concern and shows that it is one thing for a Government to declare a policy and for Parliament to pass a Bill, and quite another to ensure that it is energetically followed through.

I am not sure that clauses 18 to 25 are so welcome, as they might have a negative impact on investment in energy generation in Scotland. These provisions relate to various constraints within the energy distribution system, and it has been a particular problem at the Cheviot gap between Scotland and England, which has rumbled on for quite some time.

At the moment, there are constraints on transmission under the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements. Generators in Scotland pay to be connected to, and to use, the Great Britain transmission system. Annually, such payments amount to 40 per cent. of the total transmission charges, which, allowing for the fact that Scottish generation represents only 12 per cent. of total generation, means that Scottish generators contribute approximately £100 million a year more than what would be a fair share. In return for the payments, generators are entitled to access and to use the transmission system to move their generated electricity to market. Consequently, when they cannot have full access to the system because of inadequate grid capacity, they should be entitled to compensation for the resulting loss—and these are referred to as constraint payments.

Electricity generation in Scotland already exceeds the capacity of the network, and additional renewable generation in Scotland will exacerbate the situation. Neither National Grid nor Ofgem has previously taken sufficient steps to address the capacity shortfall, even though the problem has been known about since well before 2005. There is an ongoing programme of infrastructure reinforcement works to increase capacity, but it will be several years before the interconnector capacity between Scotland and England is sufficient to eliminate constraints.

National Grid and Ofgem previously put forward a proposal that appeared to target Scottish generators. They wanted to change the system of balancing costs so that constraint payments would effectively be charged back to the same generators, which is to say that generators would pay constraint charges for not being able to access the system, which seemed bizarre in the extreme. Thankfully that proposal was junked. However, the Bill seems to be trying to achieve much the same, although I can see that its proposals are slightly better than the original one. They are limited to the balancing market, there are good appeal mechanisms, and there is a sunset clause that will remove the provisions when the much-delayed upgrades have been introduced.

Placing artificial limits on the level of compensation that Scottish generators would receive—irrespective of the value that they provide for National Grid or the losses incurred by generators—seems daft, but the proposal also seriously undermines the confidence of those who might otherwise invest in Scotland's thermal and renewable energy sectors, including carbon capture and storage. We are placing a great deal of faith in the future of CCS to meet our emission targets, and we need to do everything possible to ensure that that happens. We cannot discriminate against existing and future Scottish generators, because that would call into question the validity of the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements.

I ask Ministers to consider the matter again, and to ensure that they do not introduce a measure that will work against future generation. We need investment in new generation, regardless of whether it involves renewables or not, but such investment will not come about if constraints of this kind are imposed.

Another part of the Bill intrigues me. I may be completely—as we say in Angus—up the wrang dreel, but I should be obliged if the Minister would clarify the meaning of clauses 27 to 31. Clause 27, entitled "Adjustment of charges to help disadvantaged groups of customers", empowers the Secretary of State to adjust charges if he thinks that some consumers are paying unfair charges. So far, so good; none of us, I hope, would disagree with that. I fully appreciate that the clause constitutes, in effect, more or less a restatement of powers that exist in the Utilities Act 2000. It seems to me, however, that the definition of the categories of customers covers all the customers of the energy companies as set out in subsection (5). That is important because of subsection (3), which states that disadvantaged customers can constitute all the members of the group specified in subsection (5).

In theory, the upshot of that is that the Secretary of State would have the power to decide that all the customers of one energy company, or indeed all of them, were paying too much for their energy, and could decide that everyone's bills should be reduced. That might be welcome, but I think we need to know exactly what the clause means. One interpretation is that it would give the Secretary of State power to decide the level of charges that energy companies could impose.

Despite the reservations that I have expressed in regard to certain clauses, I support what the Government are trying to do. If I am fortunate enough to be selected as a member of the Committee, I shall look forward to many happy hours debating the issues. This may be a small Bill, but it contains a great deal that is very important to the future of energy generation in this country.

8.58 pm

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): One of the delightful aspects of speaking late in a debate is that one has heard so many wonderful speeches. However, the theme that has typified the speeches today is that the Bill is lacking in many respects—that it is a light Bill. A Labour Member, who is not present now, described his own comments as a constructive whinge. I had thought that it was up to the Opposition to produce constructive whinges, so it was good to hear so many of them, and to hear a long list of things that should have been in the Bill but—as has been freely admitted—have not been included because time constraints made it impossible to include anything of note.

I can think of a few measures that could easily have been included, as they touch on the theme of the Bill, but sadly they are not there. One involves the production of biodiesel from used cooking oil. I drew this to the attention of the Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in a Westminster Hall debate in October. It was a very lively and well-attended debate, and he said he would reflect on the point. I therefore hoped he might have inserted some constructive measures into the Bill, but I am sorry to say that thereare none.

That debate was about the production of biodiesel by recycling used cooking oil of UK origin. That is a highly sustainable way to produce energy. We have hundreds of restaurants, fast-food premises and commercial food producers, all of which use large quantities of cooking oils. When used, they become a waste product, and they can be both costly to deal with and difficult to

[Anne Main]

dispose of. Within manufacturing industries, huge quantities of fats and oils are used, with significant quantities of waste food oils resulting from processing methods. When recycled properly, it can be a truly sustainable fuel, and we all want to increase our use of such fuels as much as possible. The Bill should have gone a little further in this regard, because it is ridiculous to dispose of such waste oils when they are ultimately a valuable recyclable resource. If we are worrying about the lights going out and shortages of fuel, it is also ridiculous that, despite the fact that the huge amount of waste from used cooking oils could be used highly efficiently as a truly recycled product, people are paying to get rid of it.

Earlier this year, I discussed this matter with Richard O'Keefe, director of Green2Go. He was the inspiration behind the debate in October. His company was established in 2007 with the express intention of providing renewable and sustainable heat and power solutions. We are hearing a lot about dirty solutions, such as coal, having to be made greener, but this is a green solution.

Green2Go is a relatively small company, but it is a key proponent of this effort. It estimates that there are currently 250 million litres of the waste product of used cooking oil available from commercial sources and significant further amounts from domestic sources. In areas that pride themselves on trying to increase recycling, such as St. Albans, we are also getting rid of this product at the domestic level.

Biodiesel, which can be manufactured from used cooking oil, is a particularly sustainable renewable fuel, whose use can reduce lifecycle carbon emissions by up to 90 per cent. If we were to use that fuel, it would help us deliver on our challenging energy targets. Used cooking oil does not cause additional deforestation, as it is a waste product that would otherwise have to be disposed of by professional collectors at significant cost—in the debates on this, it has been mentioned that sometimes it is not disposed of properly and it goes down into rivers and drainage and there is then the high cost of cleaning that up as well. Certain green pressure groups have great worries about whether the steps we are taking to try to ensure that the lights do not go out are green, but this is certainly green. It does not cause any land-use change, and the fuel is consequently one of the lowest-carbon forms of biodiesel. Converting to biodiese used cooking oil that might otherwise have gone to landfill is an excellent example of a sustainable biofuel.

The Under-Secretary of State agreed with all this in our earlier debate. As he said it was a valuable debate, I am hoping I shall hear some more from him about the issue today. This type of biofuel contributes to reducing carbon emissions and waste minimisation. As it uses a waste product, there is no resultant pressure on land use and no impact on food prices. There is a big concern about third-world countries that should be growing crops to eat but that are instead exporting crops for making biofuels. This does not contribute to that concern. Vital resources are not diverted from a valuable existing land use.

Methanol is commonly used in the process of producing biodiesel from used cooking oil. However, in March 2009—not very long ago—Ofgem reversed an earlier position and ruled that the use of methanol made from natural gas in biodiesel production discounts the fuel from being included in the renewables obligation scheme. That cannot be right. Many right hon. and hon. Members who are present have served on the Select Committee, and I see its acting Chairman, who will remember when the Committee was discussing this part of our energy remit. I raised the discounting with a witness who was giving evidence to the Committee, and he described it as a "bonkers anomaly".

A bonkers anomaly was introduced under this Government's watch in March 2009. As the Government are aware of this bonkers anomaly, I would have thought that they would have taken the opportunity in the short time left to them to address it. The ruling was made following consultation and discussion with the Department of Energy and Climate Change. As a result of the presence of that very small portion of fossil fuel derived from methanol in some biodiesels, we have this bonkers anomaly. The ruling is based on a very literal interpretation of the law, which classes the entirety of the biodiesel produced in such a way as a fossil fuel under article 9 of the renewables obligation, despite the fact that the fossil fuel element of the fuel, made from used cooking oil, is relatively small—about 11 per cent. by mass.

Members of the UK biofuels industry believe that the Ofgem ruling on biodiesel is likely to have a significant effect on the UK's industry and would have ramifications for our future domestic supply of renewable energy. That is what the Bill should be considering—to ensure that we have domestic supplies of renewable energy so that the lights do not go out. That is why there is a real missed opportunity in the Bill. I hope that we will have a chance to raise that issue in Committee.

Energy production in the UK has been set extremely ambitious long-term targets for renewable sources, yet many feel that the 2009 legislation—or at least Ofgem's interpretation of it, and I note that Ofgem is mentioned regularly in the Bill and it should have its attention drawn back to the anomaly—does not offer any incentive to use such a form of renewable fuel in the generation of electricity and heat. When I mentioned that to the Under-Secretary, I was encouraged. He agreed to meet representatives of the industry who had raised the anomaly with me to discuss it in more depth. I had heard that they were having trouble getting hold of him and I hope that he will tell me tonight that they have met. I would love to hear any update about any meeting that he has had with them. If he has not met them, I press him to renew tonight that commitment to meeting them.

The renewables obligation came into effect in 2002 to support renewable electricity projects in the UK. Under the obligation, suppliers are required to meet their obligations by presenting sufficient renewables obligation certificates—it is a mouthful, so I shall call them ROCs—which are green certificates issued to an accredited generator for eligible renewable electricity generated. The 2008 consultation by Ofgem, which led to this decision, focused on the detail that the methanol used in the process was normally derived from natural gas, itself a fossil fuel. Ofgem therefore set out that it was difficult to view biodiesel made in that way as a renewable fuel as set out in the Electricity Act 1989 and in specific parts of the Renewables Obligation Order 2006 (Amendment) Order 2007. Instead, Ofgem argued that biodiesel produced from the reagent will in turn fall within the term "fossil fuel"—that is, the whole of the

biodiesel—under article 9 of the renewables obligation and concluded that biodiesel produced in such a way should be classed as fossil fuel generation under articles 9 and 18.

I believe that the Government do not want this anomaly and that, in October, the Minister saw that the argument in favour of it was nonsense. Given that the ruling stated that where fossil fuel-derived alcohols are used no ROC will be issued, even for the biomass-derived portion of the biodiesel involved, will he—or whoever speaks on behalf of the Government—take up the suggestion that we made in October to have 0.9 of a ROC to recognise such a truly renewable biofuel and the greenness of the energy provided by it? Electricity generators cannot receive the renewable obligation on electricity that is produced from that fuel. That is despite the fact that the fuel element is so comparatively small and despite the fact that the majority of the fuel is truly recycled from the waste stream and would have no other purpose.

There was widespread industry reaction to the Ofgem ruling on the basis that exclusion from the scheme would not encourage the generation of renewable energy—something that we have talked about at length tonight. Ofgem itself has concluded that its ruling ran counter to the desires of the majority of respondents to the 2008 consultation. Ofgem has further admitted that the issues that many such respondents raised are policy decisions that are the responsibility of the Department of Energy and Climate Change and are outside the remit of Ofgem's role as the scheme's administrator.

I have raised this issue in a sitting of the Energy and Climate Change Committee, in which we discussed low-carbon technologies in a green economy—I note that our acting Chairman, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), is nodding. When I raised it with Greg Archer of the Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership, he did not hold back; as I have said, he described the situation as a "bonkers anomaly". He is not the only expert who has misgivings about the situation. I hope that the Minister will update me regarding the possibility of introducing a 0.9 ROC. He has agreed to investigate that idea, and I am sure that he will have made some progress in that regard. Used cooking oil can produce significant carbon savings and is an excellent way of using a waste product to create energy, but it currently seems to be uneconomic for many producers to do that. Will the Minister re-examine the legislation covering the treatment of biodiesel that is produced from used cooking oil to see whether anything can be done to iron out the anomaly? I would also welcome a statement on the implementation of the renewable energy directive.

Mr. David Jones: Before my hon. Friend leaves that point, will she enlighten the House as to what form of fossil fuel is comprised in that 0.1 of a ROC or that 10 per cent., of cooking oil? I should not have thought that cooking oil could possibly comprise any fossil fuel.

Anne Main: I probably have not explained that point well enough. Some 89 per cent. of the fuel will be from used cooking oil and 11 per cent. will be from the methanol that is used, which is derived from gas. That is the fossil fuel element that has unfortunately given rise to the bonkers anomaly.

I believe that every encouragement should be given to green initiatives and technologies, and that green technologies should be used on all new, large-scale development projects. If they cannot be used, there should be a good reason why not. Some used cooking oil is converted and used—I know that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood), who also spoke in my previous debate on this issue, has a used cooking oil company in his constituency. Such investment by companies is welcome, as is the fact that used cooking oil is being used in that way.

It has been in the news today—I do not know whether anyone has been reading the papers—that the famous supermarket chain, Tesco, has opened its first zero-carbon store in Ramsey, Cambridgeshire. I understand that Tesco is combining a host of energy-saving features in the store, which is part of its plan to make the company a zero-carbon business by 2050. The store is powered by an on-site generator that runs on renewable sources such as vegetable oil. The store's heating is provided by the generator, and there are a host of other green features. All that must be welcomed. It demonstrates what is possible, as well as the company's commitment to being zero-carbon.

Much is being done to reduce the impact of domestic properties, particularly in the new-build sector, but large industrial and commercial buildings often have very little provision for saving energy. I have to ask why such measures were not included in the Bill. Other hon. Members have raised this issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) has said that there should be more joined-up thinking in that regard, particularly in relation to planning. That is the way forward. There is nothing in the Bill that will commit large projects to having to explore at least some form of green energy and microgeneration on their sites. That is a totally missed opportunity.

I will give an example of a missed opportunity. I do not want such a development in my constituency, but the totally non-green plans are there for everyone to see for a massive strategic rail freight interchange at the former Radlett aerodrome site. They include huge warehousing, covering more than 3.5 million square feet. The hangars are colossal—hon. Members can imagine the amount of roof space. The development will concrete over acres of green-belt land. It is claimed that a rail freight development is a green initiative. However, although the plans provide for aesthetic improvements to the surrounding area, there is little foresight about energy use and environmental impact.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point about the use of extra space. It is a tragedy that Germany, France, Japan, Spain, Norway, America and Korea all outperform the UK on solar photovoltaic installation. Does she agree that that would be an excellent use of the roof space that she just described?

Anne Main: My hon. Friend has knocked the nail on the head. I have heard much in the debate about wind farms and how people are resistant or otherwise to them. Yet so little attention is paid to the vast amounts of space, particularly industrial space, that could be used efficiently. I believe that people who intend to develop large projects that communities are supposed

[Anne Main]

to accept should be compelled to consider that. It would make them greener and improve their carbon footprint and could overcome some of the resistance in communities to built development.

There are no plans for the solar energy generation that my hon. Friend just mentioned. There are no plans for water recycling and no microgeneration provisions for the site. It is a scandal and a huge wasted opportunity. As I said, wind farms have been much criticised today. Why are we talking about building wind farms, nuclear power stations, and so on on the green belt, when we are not saying that buildings that are already being constructed should be made as energy efficient as possible and hopefully generate energy that would go into the grid?

Surely more should be done to encourage applicants to build and invest in environmentally sustainable structures. That would lower their carbon footprint. Such disregard for green technology should mean a rejection. We should not allow plans to go ahead if they have not made even a nod to green technologies. How on earth are we supposed to meet our stringent targets when developers can simply build what they like without having to do that? That is important.

David Taylor: The hon. Lady referred to wind turbines. I believe that her party, were it elected, is likely to introduce a policy whereby wind turbines would not be allowed within a minimum distance of any houses. What sort of distance does she consider appropriate for such an embargo?

Anne Main: I am afraid that I am not good on planning distances, but I am good on the planning distance for the rail freight terminal, which will come within 100 yards of some houses. If the Government allow that, I shall look to the hon. Gentleman to ensure that he gets his yardage right, too. The development is totally wrong.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne Main: No, I have only a few minutes left. It has been a long debate and the Labour Benches were empty for a while, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive my not giving way, given that I have sat through the graveyard shift, as it is sometimes called.

Part 2 deals with fuel poverty. The Bill includes various schemes to reduce fuel poverty, and that must be welcomed. The most recently available sub-regional split of fuel poverty figures, which relate to 2003, showed that there are approximately 1,900 fuel-poor households in St. Albans—which is considered to be an affluent constituency—and around 22,200 fuel-poor households in Hertfordshire. Since then, the number of fuel-poor homes nationally has risen sharply from 1.2 million in 2004 to 3.5 million. I can extrapolate rises of a similar magnitude in my constituency. This year, the Government announced that 4.6 million households in England could be fuel poor, despite a pledge to end fuel poverty by 2016. Does the Minister agree that an undelivered pledge is a worthless pledge?

I agree with the Macmillan campaign, of which I am a patron, that many groups must bear the cost of having to heat their homes. The ill, particularly people who have terminal cancer, are an important group. If we cannot get fuel poverty measures right for the Government's designated groups, I hold out little hope that we can get them right for people with long-term illnesses, such as those who are supported by the Macmillan campaign.

9.20 pm

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St. Albans (Anne Main). We do not always agree, but I warmed to her defence of the green belt and agreed with it. She is exactly right, too, about utilising used cooking oil for biodiesel. As she said, I have raised the issue, and I was pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change agreed to meet my constituents and me. We all look forward to positive announcements, if not today, then perhaps in the pre-Budget report on Wednesday. We live in hope.

Liberal Democrats have given this limited Bill a broad welcome. The revisions to Ofgem's remit to take account of environmental considerations are long overdue, as is a more consistent framework for social tariffs. Millions endure fuel poverty, and social tariffs are patchily applied by private sector companies. Liberal Democrats have called for a more uniform framework ever since, in the case of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), the time of former Prime Minister Mrs. Thatcher, so measures to tackle the problem more consistently are long overdue.

The measures to promote carbon capture and storage are welcome, too. CCS is a critical technology if we are to achieve our aims in tackling climate change, and while we—I hope—make the transition to a more renewable energy economy in the long-term future, we need transition technologies. I certainly support CCS, rather than nuclear power, as a means of keeping the lights on. I was astonished by the speeches by Conservative Members, which featured consistent attacks on renewable energy, particularly wind energy, and consistent support for nuclear power.

Chris Ruane: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about Conservative policy on wind power. Does he agree that the description by the Leader of the Opposition of wind turbines off the coast of north Wales as giant bird blenders is despicable?

Martin Horwood: Not only despicable but wrong, as modern wind turbines, especially the larger ones that avoid providing perches for birds, have turned out to be perfectly safe for most bird life. Such an ill-informed attack on wind power is exactly the kind of thing that we should reject.

The Conservatives' support for nuclear power worries me just as much. That technology costs us billions even today, and we do not how, when or where to dispose of nuclear waste, which will leave a toxic legacy for future generations for as long as 1,000 years. I was struck by the speech by the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed), which was well informed and technically accurate. He is a gentleman who knows the nuclear industry very well, so it is instructive that he made a plea to open the door to public subsidy for the nuclear industry. I hope that the Government will take the opportunity tonight very firmly to reject that out of hand.

We agree with some of the criticism of this limited Bill. The encouragement of social tariffs is welcome, but it is very little and, I would say, much too late. There are weaknesses in the Bill, and there is still not a clear ban on differentiated fuel tariffs according to the method of payment, which have been widely condemned. However, there is not an absolutely clear commitment in the Bill to remove that inconsistency. We have heard a great deal about the lack of attention to rural fuel poverty in particular.

The steps towards more carbon capture and storage are welcome, but there is a loophole in the Bill, which I have mentioned to the Secretary of State on several occasions. There is no guarantee that by the 2020s, coal-fired powers stations will not emit large amounts of carbon, with only a proportion of their output subject to CCS. Ministers are nodding their heads, but I cannot do better than quote the progress report to Parliament by the Committee on Climate Change, issued in October. It is concerned that we have not given a strong enough signal that

"for any plant not fitted with CCS there will be little or no role further into the 2020s".

The report goes on to say:

"The Government should make it absolutely clear now that whether or not CCS can be deemed economically viable any conventional coal plant still operating unabated beyond the early 2020s would only generate for a very limited number of hours."

We still have not heard that commitment from Government.

We have been debating the Bill in an enjoyably cool environment. When Madam Deputy Speaker was in the Chair earlier, she considered turning the heating up so that we were all warmed up during the debate. I know that the Minister was feeling particularly chilly, but it is entirely appropriate that on the first day of the Copenhagen summit we have resisted that temptation, and for once seem to have saved some energy in this place and reduced the amount of hot air in the Chamber—which many of our constituents might think could be done on many other occasions.

As it is the first day of the Copenhagen summit, it is right that I should take a moment to express our unity across the House. We are critical of Government policy from time to time. We are critical of many aspects of the Bill, but when the Secretary of State goes to Copenhagen, if he goes to press for a tough deal on climate change and for a clear timetable for binding commitments—early in 2010, I hope—he goes with our best wishes and our support. It is quite possible that the future of human civilisation as we know it may rest on decisions taken in Copenhagen over the next couple of weeks. That obliges us to put aside national and party political divisions for the common good. To that end, we wish him well.

9.26 pm

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): We have had a thoughtful, constructive, well-informed debate which, on rare occasions, related to the content of the Bill. Most of the rest of it dealt with wider energy issues. The Secretary of State would probably say that the Bill is so good that we did not need to discuss it in the Chamber.

I listened in vain for the words that one usually hears—the senior Back Bencher who says, "This is a great Bill, which deals with the challenges that we face," or the energetic young Back Bencher who is keen to get promotion in the remaining few months, who says, "My constituents will be very grateful that the Government have had the vision to bring forward these vital measures," but they have not been here. The word that has run through the entire debate is "modest". After 12 years, 15 Ministers, countless reviews, consultations and White Papers—more consultation than one could imagine possible—the culmination is a modest Bill.

The issues that have come through are clear. The first theme that has run through the debate is the lack of detail in the Bill. We do not know at what level the levy for carbon capture and storage will be set. The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) asked who would be exempted from the levy. We need to understand that. We need to understand which technologies might be exempted. Will it be low-carbon technologies or zero-carbon technologies? Will micro-generation be exempted? We need a great deal more detail before we can give the Bill the approval that it needs.

On the fuel poverty issues, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) asked who would benefit from the fuel poverty measures. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Jones) and the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir) spoke about the need to protect people who live in rural areas and who are dependent on oil or LPG. We need to understand who the Government have it in mind to exempt.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) asked who would own the intellectual property from the carbon capture projects. The hon. Member for Angus wanted to know whether the changes in the transmission arrangements would be damaging to investment in Scotland. If the Bill is to get the necessary agreement to proceed to Committee, we must have answers on those details. They cannot be left vague for the Secretary of State to decide in future. We need to know what is in the Government's mind, so that people can clearly understand what is being supported.

The second theme of the debate has been the lack of ambition. The hon. Member for Sherwood talked about carbon capture and storage as a competition without end; the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey talked about the slowness of the whole procedure, which has resulted in Britain moving from the top of the international league in CCS and slipping down the table; and the hon. Member for Angus talked about the need to understand the role of gas in the carbon capture model.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) talked a great deal about his concern that there was not more ambition on energy efficiency, but he also managed completely to reinvent Conservative party policy. He was wrong about what it includes, what it might cost and how it would be paid for—but apart from that, he was pretty close.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) talked about the need to be more ambitious in using the carbon price as a key driver of low-carbon technologies, and many hon. Members called for the need to be more supportive of emerging technologies. The hon. Gentleman talked about marine renewables and the absolute insistence that, with all our natural potential for such technology, we should not end up in 20 years' time looking back and saying, "How did we lose that advantage? Why did the Germans, the Danes and the others manage to master that technology? Why didn't we have the leadership that was necessary in those areas?"

[Charles Hendry]

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby talked about the importance of developing energy from waste technologies, because we must change our whole way of thinking. We have to think of waste as a resource, not just as a cost. We have to do so much to reduce the amount of waste that goes to landfill or landrise, and we must ensure that we deal with it by addressing both the waste issue and the energy issue. My hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Anne Main), warming to the cooking oil theme that she has made her own, also made sure that we start to address those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West talked about pump storage and what we are going to do to realise the potential in that area. The hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) mentioned nuclear power and gave a broadly thoughtful and sensible speech, until it was taken over by some raging creature, and he launched into a vicious attack on the Opposition parties while trying to say that he sought consensus. It was the sort of speech that, when he re-reads it in the morning, may make him wonder whether he got the balance quite right.

Running through the debate is the issue of missed opportunities and the recognition that the Bill does not rise to the challenges that we face on energy policy. We face a genuine crisis, but we do not see any measures to address it. Again, I return to the hon. Member for Sherwood, who is the acting Chairman of the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change. I always thought that he would be a very good Energy Minister. Indeed, there is still time—we have a change every few months—and he could still have the chance to be the Energy Minister before the next election.

The hon. Gentleman's words made it sound as if he were being critical of the Conservative party, but, when one listened to what he was saying underneath, one found that he was actually putting the boot into his own Government. There he was, talking about the £200 billion of investment that is so essential, and which we must make. He said that the investment needed a secure framework—but we have been waiting for that for 12 years, and we are still waiting. He talked about the need to work harder to encourage international companies to invest in Britain and to understand the potential that is here, and he also talked about power cuts.

The Secretary of State says, "No, there's no risk of cuts," but he writes articles saying that there may be power cuts. Even the Government's own documentation mentions power cuts: there they are, on page 86 of the UK Low Carbon Transition Plan, although it does not say "power cuts", but "demand unserved", which is Government-speak for power cuts, and the equivalent of a city the size of Manchester being without electricity every night for three months. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman told us where we were failing to respond to the size of the challenge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood), in a very powerful critique, talked about the serious challenge that we face on gas storage. We have just 15 days' storage, and in January we exported through the interconnector 25 million cubic metres of gas a day—the equivalent of 250 Albert Halls of gas every single day being pumped out of this country. Just as we were approaching a dispute between Russia and Ukraine, during the coldest winter for 18 years, our gas storage was down to just four days. Nevertheless, here we have a Bill, and in it the Government do not have a single word to say about gas storage.

We have also missed, particularly on this day when the Copenhagen summit is starting, the challenge of discussing what more can be done urgently to tackle the problem of CO_2 emissions. Nowhere in the Bill does one see a driving sense of urgency. There is a little movement and change, but no sense that this is a crisis that has to be addressed. The hon. Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire (Nick Ainger)—I am delighted to see him coming in on cue—talked about a lack of the strategic thinking that is needed if we are to see the development of marine technologies such as offshore wind. The Government must take the lead and put in place down the coastline the high-voltage DC cables to connect up those facilities.

In terms of failing to recognise the challenges, most telling of all was the Secretary of State's indication that the Government would come forward with a strategy on fuel poverty in the spring. The numbers of people in fuel poverty have gone up, and they need help now, not proposals after the winter. We need a sense of urgency and a recognition that the Bill must do more than it currently sets out to do.

I turn to the key elements in the Bill. On the CCS levy, there has to be a funding mechanism to make carbon capture and storage happen—we completely support that. However, let me ask the Secretary of State again: where is the money from the third round of the EU emissions trading scheme that was promised? How much is in it, and what has it been allocated to? He says that it has all been spent, so what has been done with it? We recognise that if it is not available, the levy may be a way of trying to support that. However, if the Bill is to go into Committee, we need from Ministers a clear explanation of what has happened to the Government's expected revenue from the third round.

However, the levy is just part of this. We still do not have the leadership that we require if we are to lead the world in CCS. We were leading, but we have been overtaken by America, Canada, Germany, Abu Dhabi, Norway, Australia and China— critically, given that this whole project was designed to develop a technology that we could sell to the Chinese. We must have more strategic leadership. How will the whole process be handled? What aspect of Government will make CCS happen? Who will be responsible for scoping the potential sites? Will there be oversized pipelines to facilitate the development of clusters? Can we not do still more to speed up the pace of this competition, which has been absurdly slow? We need to move towards a conclusion, and to know who is going to be the winner on the pilot project.

The whole aspect of social tariffs and support for consumers brings home how far away we are from achieving the fuel poverty targets set out by the Government, with the legally binding commitments that by 2010 all vulnerable households would be taken out of fuel poverty and that by 22 November 2016 every household in the country would be out of fuel poverty. The Secretary of State may not know if that will happen in the morning or the afternoon of 22 November; nevertheless, it is a clear commitment, and the Government must now recognise that all the movements are in the wrong direction.

As the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown said, prices will be rising, and everything that is necessary will be expensive. Of course we support social tariffs, but we want the Bill to go much further. We want much more information on bills so that people can see how much electricity they are using in comparison with their neighbours in similar houses. We want information on bills about CO_2 emissions. We want people to be able to see how much less their bill would be if they were on the lowest tariff available from the company, and, perhaps, information on environmental charges. We want those things because they are the ways in which we can help to deal with fuel poverty. In addition, we need a great drive forward on energy efficiency. It is extraordinary that in a Bill that deals with fuel poverty, energy efficiency does not get a mention.

The Bill includes proposals on the remit of Ofgem, which has interpreted its new role well. Project Discovery shows that it has been giving good consideration to the issues that face us. However, we need to understand more clearly who is in charge. The Bill suggests that there are equal powers as between the Government and Ofgem, but it is clear to us that in policy terms Government should have primacy.

The Bill will do many worthy things, but it is simply not up to the scale of the challenge that we face. We need to attract £200 billion of investment in the next 15 years.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Charles Hendry: I will not, because I am keen to ensure that the Minister of State has plenty of time to respond.

We need to do more to secure that investment, and the Bill simply will not do it. Those who are looking to invest in nuclear power need much more certainty on the price of carbon, and the Bill fails to give them any reassurance. If we are to become more reliant on gas imports—many predictions suggest that 80 per cent. of our gas will be imported by 2020—we need much more action on gas storage, and the Bill has not a single word to say about that. If we are to drive forward investment in renewables, the Government have to accept that they have a strategic role in requiring high-voltage DC cables to be put in place, and providing much more support for embryonic marine renewables. They must ensure that we develop a real spirit of partnership, so that when applications for new renewable facilities come to our communities, they know that there is something significant in it for them if they decide to host those facilities.

The Bill is not so much a plan of action as a statement of intent that the Government will think about consulting and having a review of whether they should change their energy policies. We need firm government and decisive action: time is not on our side, and the Bill is not up to the challenge. The Secretary of State is a very ambitious man—so ambitious, we are told, that one day he would even like to be Leader of the Opposition. The Bill is not ambitious, and if it goes to Committee we hope to work with the Government to find consensus and address many of the issues that have been left out of it.

9.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): Combating climate change while maintaining secure and affordable energy supplies is one the greatest challenges that our Government face. This is a landmark year in the fight against climate change and today, as many contributors have said, is the start of the discussions at Copenhagen. The world has come together in an attempt to reach a new international agreement to tackle climate change. We are going into the negotiations with a clear plan of the ambitious, effective and fair deal that we believe all the world's nations must agree, and confident that the UK has a track record of taking real action at home to tackle our own emissions. The low carbon transition plan, which we launched in July, sets out a clear pathway that will lead us to a low-carbon world with secure energy supplies and protection for the most vulnerable. The Bill puts into place legislation that will implement that plan.

Let me comment on the speeches that have been made today. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) simply gave an alarmist account of what this country faces, without any positive reference to the measures in the Bill, some of which tackle the need for energy security in future. He constantly referred to matters that were not in the Bill, reciting a huge wish list of things that he believes could be legislated for. He failed to notice that most of the measures of which he spoke are already under way and do not require primary legislation. It was complete nonsense of a speech.

The hon. Gentleman said that there was a possibility of power cuts, which has been repeated by Opposition Members over and over again. *[Interruption.]* I shall come to what my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) said in due course, but at the moment I am dealing with the opening Front-Bench speeches. We challenged the hon. Gentleman on the need for assistance to households to make their homes more energy efficient. We still do not know how the Conservatives plan to fund the provision of £6,500 to households. He challenged us by saying that we have only 500 homes in our pilots, but why do we have pilots? To work out what is the best way of incentivising people and how the public are most likely to respond. That is why the pilots are critical. The hon. Gentleman is not able to tell me tonight how the up-front payments for those energy efficiency measures will be made, and he has never been able to say.

David Taylor: Is it not the case that the sum involved would be £6,500 times 20 million or so, so we are talking about £160 billion—a figure not unadjacent to 10 per cent. of gross domestic product? Surely the official Opposition must have thought in more detail about how they can fund that.

Joan Ruddock: My hon. Friend is right. One would have thought they would have done so, but it appears they have not.

The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells spoke about how vital an emissions performance standard is and again said that such a measure was not in the Bill. The fact is that it does not need to be in the Bill. We do not need primary legislation and can adopt an emissions performance standard without new legislation if we wish to do so—*[Interruption.]* I will come to that in due course.

The other point on the emissions performance standard is that we think it better to gain a proper understanding of the potential of CCS before considering how the regulatory and financial measures relating to emissions

[Joan Ruddock]

from power stations will be affected. We will continue to maintain a rolling review of progress, as we have clearly stated, with CCS technologies. By 2018, we will publish a report—*[Interruption.]* It is not far off. By 2018, we will publish a report that considers the case for new measures to drive a move to clean coal.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Lady, but there is a constant chorus of chuntering from those on the Opposition Front Bench. Mr. Barker, you need to sit quietly and listen to the Minister's speech. Stop chuntering—I do not want to hear it.

Joan Ruddock: I am so grateful, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells spoke of the UK falling behind in the race to build CCS. That could not be further from the truth. A number of other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), mentioned China, but no project in China is on the scale of any of our projects, and no construction is under way for capture, transportation and storage on the scale that our projects propose. It is therefore complete nonsense to suggest that other countries have overtaken us. We are still in the lead. We are co-operating with other countries, which is the most reasonable thing for us to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood, the acting Chairman of the Energy and Climate Change Committee, made a very thoughtful speech and we are glad that he welcomed our CCS proposals. He spoke with passion about the mining communities and the future of coal mining in this country. Of course, it is CCS that can offer a guarantee of a future for those activities.

My hon. Friend spoke in more moderate and reasonable terms about a possible energy supply gap around 2016, but I must tell the House that the evidence does not support that view. It is true that 18 GW of electricity generation is due to close by 2018, but nearly 20 GW is under construction or has planning consent. Industry is responding to the signals of the need for new generation by getting on with the building. The latest analysis issued by the Government has shown that there is no gap. Ofgem's "Project Discovery" presents a wide range of scenarios and shows that electricity supplies would meet demand in almost all foreseeable situations.

Rob Marris: Is my hon. Friend as surprised as I am that Conservative policy on the energy gap still seems to be to sit on the fence about nuclear and say, "If we need a nuclear power station, we'll just pop down to the supermarket and get one"? That is a crazy policy.

Joan Ruddock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but perhaps the most remarkable thing the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells said was that he was entirely relaxed about the shadow Business Secretary's comments about wind turbines. It is quite clear that the Conservatives do not want the new generation capacity that we believe is so vital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood asked about the consideration of clusters. We understand that co-location of CCS demonstration projects could reduce the overall costs of the demonstration programme, but the competition process could be weakened if that is a requirement. It is not a requirement, but clearly those who come forward in the competition might propose that making a cluster is an attractive feature of the offer.

Anne Main: The Minister has a long history of opposing nuclear power. What caused her to change her mind?

Joan Ruddock: May I correct the hon. Lady? I have a long history of leading a campaign against nuclear weapons.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) said that he wanted to see more ambition in the Bill, although he welcomed many aspects of it, and we are grateful for that. He challenged us to say whether there would be new coal that did not have some sort of constraint on emissions. We have made it clear that all new coal will have to have a degree of carbon capture, and that if the technology is proven, there will be retrofitting. As he knows, other old stations will go out of use, so it is clear—

Martin Horwood *rose—*

Joan Ruddock: I am not giving way on this point. It is clear that under our proposal, if the technology works, we will end up where we want to be. To suggest that it should be in place from the beginning would be to defeat the progress of the technology completely.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey also asked about CCS and intellectual property. We want to have the maximum sharing, and that is why we are working with China. We want to see the sharing and development of technology. It will be necessary, of course, to have some intellectual property rights, but we do not envisage those standing in the way of the kind of co-operation that we need.

The hon. Gentleman, and other hon. Members, asked about fuel poverty and argued that those off the gas grid are not protected. One way to deal with the situation would be to put the social price support on electricity bills. In that way, we could assist everyone who had an electricity supply, which is virtually everyone in the country. That would mean that we did not disadvantage those who are off the gas grid.

Sir Robert Smith: That is an interesting proposition. Does it mean that those who are off the gas grid would get a greater reduction in the electricity social tariff to make up for the fact that their heating comes from oil or LPG?

Joan Ruddock: What will be done is a matter for extensive consultation, when the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to make those points. I offer that suggestion as a way out of the dilemma that hon. Members mentioned.

I was asked about clause 14 by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey. The Secretary of State already has the power to amend the fuel poverty definition under the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000. We are not, however, looking to change that definition. The hon. Gentleman also asked what we could do those customers already suffering harm, but whose cases had been timed out. The legislation will not apply retrospectively, as I think he understood,

and that is why we are extending the provision to enable breaches of licence going back more than 12 months—indeed, up to five years—to be tackled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) said that the Bill might be modest, but it represents a real step forward. He is so right. He recognises that this limited Bill will do a lot that is complementary to the huge programme of change that is already under way. He demonstrated his deep understanding of the relationship between the three elements of fuel poverty—prices, energy efficiency and incomes—and I am grateful for his welcome of the investment and regulatory approach that we are taking in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood), in an alarmist speech, spoke a great deal about gas storage. He accused us of coming late to new nuclear, but it was his party that said that it was a policy of last resort. We are getting on with the job while his party has been dithering. He spoke about Vestas, which is producing blades not for the UK market, but for the US market. He said that there is nothing in the Bill to incentivise wind turbines—that is incredible, because we have the renewables obligation certificates—and nothing for local communities, when of course there are jobs and investment.

Mr. Ellwood: Will the Minister give way?

Joan Ruddock: I cannot; I do not have time.

The hon. Gentleman asked what we would do if this winter was as harsh as last winter. National Grid, which is most closely involved in protecting security of supply, tells us that although unforeseen events could occur, overall supply and demand in gas and electricity look relatively comfortable. We have the highest generation margin for many years and gas import infrastructure has increased by 500 per cent. over the past decade.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) spoke about the carbon price and suggested that there should be a mechanism for underpinning it. That is not something that we are going to adopt, at least not at present, because we see significant risks in attempting to manage the carbon price. For example, introducing a price floor would set a precedent for intervening in the market and lead to increased calls for a price ceiling in times of higher economic growth. He also argued that market support is not sufficient for the development of marine technology. We always keep the way to incentivise such development under review. I also point out to him the investments that we are making in the south-west in marine renewables.

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) made a strong and constructive speech in favour of nuclear and is obviously a keen advocate of new technology—he made a reference to my old college, Imperial. He can be assured that we will be co-ordinating with others in the various CCS projects, as I have indicated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) spoke on behalf of his constituents, as always, about their keen interest in all things nuclear. He welcomed the social price support, but asked us to do more. We are always looking to do more on fuel poverty and will consider everything he said. On CCS, he referred to the huge potential opportunities, including job opportunities, for areas with CO_2-intensive industries. We agree with him and believe that CCS will be adaptable to many industries.

The hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Jones) asked whether the Secretary of State would exclude rural communities from the CCS levy. That is not one of our plans, but all such issues will be a matter for debate in Committee. He was also not keen on the proliferation of wind farms in Wales, but we are talking about a technology that can be used now and ought to be used now, and we should be getting on with that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire (Nick Ainger) gave a helpful account of gas import and storage. He welcomed the Bill, and we appreciate his support. On fuel poverty, he argued that pensioners were not an absolute priority, but I have to tell him that, regrettably, the majority of people in fuel poverty are still pensioners.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir) posed a lot of questions that I think I have dealt with already. *[Interruption.]* I am being urged to come to the end of my remarks by everyone around me.

This is an important Bill. It is important to implement the measures to decarbonise our electricity supplies, help more vulnerable customers with their energy bills and provide the clear market framework needed for a transition to a low-carbon economy.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ENERGY BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Energy Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 21 January 2010.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed. *(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

ENERGY BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Energy Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State by virtue of the Act,

(2) any expenditure incurred by the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority by virtue of the Act, and

(3) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

ENERGY BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)).

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Energy Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the imposition of charges in connection with the provision of financial assistance relating to the development and use of carbon capture and storage technology, and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 5 to 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

Health Care and Associated Professions

That the draft Health Professions (Hearing Aid Dispensers) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 22 October, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.

Income Tax

That the draft Tax Credits (Excluded Companies) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 19 October, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.

Corporation Tax

That the draft Distributions (Excluded Companies) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 15 October, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

Electoral Commission

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Ms Harriet Harman relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice of a motion has been given that the instrument be approved.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

REGIONAL SELECT COMMITTEE (LONDON)

Motion made,

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr. Andy Slaughter and Mr. Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That John Austin be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Fiona Mactaggart be added.—*(Rosemary McKenna, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Michael Jabez Foster and Mr. David Kidney be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Jeff Ennis, Judy Mallaber and Chris Ruane be added.—*(Rosemary McKenna, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

TAX LAW REWRITE BILLS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Mr. David Gauke and Mr. George Mudie be discharged from the Joint Committee on Tax Law Rewrite Bills and Mr. William Bain and Mr. Andrew Tyrie be added.—*(Rosemary McKenna, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

Asylum System

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

10.1 pm

Clare Short (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Ind Lab): I have secured this Adjournment debate in order to plead with the Government to reconsider the disgraceful arrangements that have been in place since 14 October this year for processing new claims from asylum seekers who are already in the UK. I have discussed this with the Minister, and it is my view that the whole international asylum system needs reorganising, and that the existing convention is out of date and needs renegotiating. For example, it is ridiculous that people cannot apply for asylum in the UK without arriving here, and they have to pay people-smugglers to get here. The possibility of applying for asylum is therefore controlled by criminal networks.

I also believe that the £2 billion a year that the Government spend running a large bureaucracy designed to refuse as many cases as possible could be much better spent elsewhere. However, the inadequacies of the international system do not excuse the way in which people already in the UK are subjected to a refusal to allow them to work, and given very mean benefits, which have recently been cut further. As soon as their claims are refused, all support is cut off. We therefore have significant numbers of destitute, homeless asylum seekers scattered throughout our cities. It is the conclusion of almost everyone who works in this field that this cruelty is deliberately inflicted to encourage asylum seekers to leave the UK, and to discourage others from arriving.

I see many such cases in my constituency advice bureau. The people who have been refused have often waited for many years for a decision. They are destitute and homeless. Not surprisingly, many of them suffer from depression and other mental and physical illnesses. Heartbreakingly, for example, two weeks ago, I saw a man from Gaza who had been here for two or three years. He was trying, through the Red Cross, to contact his seven brothers and sisters who were still in Gaza. He did not know whether they had survived the Israeli bombardment that took place a year ago. He had recently been very badly beaten up in Stoke, and came to me with a medical report saying that he had severe post-traumatic stress disorder. He was frightened of all authority and distrustful of everyone. He was destitute, and reliant on another asylum seeker to help him to deal with the authorities and find some kind of food and shelter. I frequently feel ashamed that this is how we are running our asylum system in Britain in 2009.

May I ask the Minister in passing to ask the National Asylum Support Service to review the placing of asylum seekers in Stoke? I have heard of more than one case of asylum seekers there being very badly beaten up. We know that the British National party has considerable representation on the council there. I really think we should do something about that.

Fortunately, in this bleak picture, there are some good people in Birmingham and elsewhere to whom those in great distress can turn. I am particularly impressed by the work of ASIRT—Asylum Support and Immigration Resource Team—in Birmingham, which helps people to sort out their legal position and make properly organised new applications. Then there is my old friend Geoff Wilkins, who with others runs a destitution fund, supported by various charities and Church groups so that we can help people with small amounts of money and provide temporary housing for homeless women and children while they are helped to submit properly organised new applications, which enable them to apply for hard case support from the UK Border Agency.

Similar organisations in other parts of the UK, report the same experience. In October 2008, for example, members of the Asylum Support Partnership, plus a number of other agencies run by the Red Cross and others, recorded the number of visits made by asylum seekers in one month. The study found that destitution is most common among refused asylum seekers and that 1,178 visits from among this group took place in October, and that 62 per cent. of the destitute asylum seekers have been destitute for six months and more. Of them, 70 per cent. were from Iraq, Iran, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Somalia—all deeply troubled countries likely to generate asylum seekers. Similar studies in Leeds and Leicester showed an increase in the number of destitute asylum seekers this year compared with 2008, an increase in long-term destitution and also an increase in those reporting physical and mental health problems, including HIV/AIDS, pregnancy and tuberculosis.

The Children's Society contacted me when it noticed that this Adjournment debate would be taking place. It reminded me that in 2008 it published a report that revealed, in its words,

"shocking evidence of children growing up in households without food, heating or toys, mothers forced to prostitute themselves to survive, young people in care cut off from any help and at 18 becoming homeless".

It pointed out that the main cause of destitution was lack of legal representation during the asylum claims and concluded that the lack of proper legal advice was directly responsible for the failure of many asylum claims.

Since then, the Children's Society has set up the west midlands destitution project to work with Church partners and others to help such families. Many families were found to be destitute either because, having been refused asylum, they had their support cut off or through delays in bureaucracy after applying for support. It concluded that the effects of destitution on children were very serious indeed. Many of the children considered in the forthcoming report, which I believe is due shortly, were displaying, in its words,

"signs of mental and physical ill-health".

That was the rather shameful situation that refused asylum seekers faced in the UK. Let me repeat that many were refused because they did not have adequate legal representation when they made their first application. Then, on 14 October 2009, without any notice or consultation, the UK Border Agency announced the establishment of an even worse new set of arrangements that required new asylum submissions to be made in person and not by post. A ministerial statement explained that because there were parts of the system where information "is not gripped quickly"—I think those were the Minister's words—applications from those who have been refused cannot in future be made by post.

[Clare Short]

Instead, people have to make an appointment and then go in person to Liverpool if they first applied before March 2007, or to a regional centre if they applied after that.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. As someone who has a huge number of asylum cases in his constituency, may I say that this is one of the most unacceptable changes in policy ever, as it is impractical and completely arrogant and insensitive? I am glad that the right hon. Lady has sought this debate and I hope that her plea to the Minister will make him realise, as I believe his officials do already, that this system cannot justifiably be allowed to continue.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and I really cannot believe that the Minister intended this to be as bad as it has proved to be. I am hopeful that he will agree to review and change the situation.

In order to receive hard case financial support—which is also known as section 4 support, and is the only support of any kind that is available to asylum seekers who have been refused once—people must present their applications to Liverpool, and the UK Border Agency must validate their claims. Incidentally, to accommodate the change, the office currently deciding on hard case support applications that have already been submitted has been moved from Liverpool to Croydon, and the Refugee Council's Birmingham office tells us that as a consequence the number of decisions made has declined from five per day to five in two weeks. That inevitably means more destitution and homelessness for those who are in the queue for hard case support.

When we ask the UK Border Agency how destitute people are to get to Liverpool—and they are advised to bring family members if their names are to be added to applications—the agency makes it clear that it will not provide funds for travel, let alone for overnight accommodation if families cannot travel there and back in a day. When questioned, it said that the voluntary sector should fund such travel. That is a disgraceful suggestion, particularly at a time when charities are hard pressed because of the general recession.

Part of the madness of the new arrangements lies in the fact that the system has recently been reorganised and regionalised. There are offices in Birmingham and other regions, but people from Scotland, Dover, London, Bristol and Birmingham must go to Liverpool if they first applied before March 2007. Moreover, there will be no interviews when they get there. Papers are simply to be handed over, and no interpreters are available. It is impossible to understand the intentions behind the new arrangements without concluding that they were designed to make it as difficult as possible for people to make new applications and to apply for hard case support.

I am afraid, however, that the position is even worse than I have described so far. Applicants cannot simply turn up in Liverpool with their applications; they must first make an appointment by telephone. The formal opening hours of the telephone line are between 9 am and 4 pm, Monday to Friday, but there are only 80 appointment slots per day, and the system will not allow an appointment to be made more than 10 days in advance. When all the slots have been used up, the line is closed. I understand that it has been closed at noon on most days recently, but desperate people do not know that. They telephone constantly and hear an engaged tone as other desperate people telephone and the lines clash. Eventually they may get through, but then an answering machine tells them that the line is closed.

The reason for this Kafkaesque system is, I understand, that the case resolution department has been set a deadline of 20 days to decide whether new submissions are valid, and whether those making them can therefore receive hard case support and cease to be destitute. The 20 days run from the day on which the appointment is made—so the answer is to close the line and not make appointments, and leave people destitute beforehand so that the 20-day target can be met. Kafka would be proud of those arrangements.

The new system has made provision for exceptional cases. It is theoretically possible for someone who is very ill and cannot travel to Liverpool to apply by post, but to obtain permission to do that the person must—guess what?—telephone the same number to which it is almost impossible to get through. I recently heard of a traumatised and severely ill asylum seeker who had been viciously beaten in Stoke-on-Trent. I have not been able to discover whether he is my Gazan constituent. He has also been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and is incapable of travelling to Liverpool. His further submission has been refused because it was posted, and he therefore cannot obtain hard case support and continues to be destitute. I also know of an adviser who spent eight days repeatedly telephoning before finally managing to secure an appointment.

On top of all that, when people do present themselves in Liverpool, they are often met by a security guard who gives them a slip and sends them away. If that is the system, why not just post the submission? Clearly this has nothing to do with getting a grip on the information.

It is impossible to explain these changes without concluding that the ending of postal applications is simply designed to make it more difficult to make an application. This will inevitably increase destitution and homelessness among this very vulnerable group of people. Legal practitioners have concluded that the courts will strike down these arrangements, as they have struck down previous arrangements. In the meantime, however, terrible suffering is being inflicted.

I sincerely ask the Minister to undertake to review the situation, as I cannot believe he intended that it should work in this way. I ask him to revert to having postal applications, and to make arrangements for there to be very quick responses to valid applications for hard case support. Otherwise, to our deep shame, we will see growing numbers of homeless, destitute, mentally ill asylum seekers spread across the UK over Christmas and beyond.

10.16 pm

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short) for raising these issues with her customary sincerity, conviction and consistency. I

shall try to respond directly to the points she has made, and I undertake to look into any matters where I am unable to do so.

There are some misunderstandings. The right hon. Lady started off by saying that the existing convention is out of date. I am on record as saying I also believe that to be the case, but I suspect that that is for different reasons. She suggested that it should be possible to make asylum claims out of country, but I suggest that that would not be practical and would not achieve the desired intention. We are very proud of the United Kingdom's work through the United Nations, and particularly the gateway protection programme. We have a very good record compared with those of other advanced countries; that is frequently recognised by the UN.

The right hon. Lady also asserted that asylum support has been cut. Again, I think that is a misunderstanding. I have double-checked the figures since her letter to the Prime Minister, and I have sent a reply to her on this point. The increase in asylum support was 5.1 per cent. That is in line with the September consumer prices index, rather than the December index, which we had the option of choosing. We chose the September index, because I felt it was right to do so. There were some changes, particularly in the 25 to 26 age bracket and the single parent bracket. Nobody has lost money in real terms as a result of those changes—I have checked the figures in the right hon. Lady's letter—but what has changed is that the number of children has been recognised in respect of that support.

To turn to a particularly serious point, the right hon. Lady said that destitution was a deliberate policy. That is not the case.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Exactly how much money are these asylum seekers receiving?

Mr. Woolas: If time permits, I shall come on to deal with the detail of that. The letter in reply to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood will outline the figures and give that answer. A number of other changes have been made.

The right hon. Lady made a very important point about Stoke-on-Trent. There is a political difficulty here, which has also arisen in other towns where the activities of the organised far-right may be designed to achieve the objective of stopping asylum support. This is a very important point which I will look into. I have received two pieces of correspondence that I am aware of about this issue: one of them is from a housing provider, and the other is from an hon. Member.

The right hon. Lady made points about changes in respect of Liverpool, and I shall come straight to them. It is already the case that an asylum claim that is not made at a port of entry—there are such cases, of course—must be made in person, at Croydon or one of the other centres.

Our policy is to improve the decision making and to make quicker and better quality decisions. The problem in the past has been that the backlog has built up. A year ago, in my speech to University college London, I put it on the record that the failure of successive Governments to provide support has caused division in communities and hardship for the people applying. Our policy is to improve the decision making and the Select Committee has concentrated on getting rid of the legacy backlog. That is what we are doing.

In order to provide good legal advice early in the process, which is our policy—it is in the interests of a fairer system to do so—we have the Solihull project, which we are examining, whereby legal advice can be provided earlier rather than later to avoid some of the problems that the right hon. Lady has mentioned. As a constituency MP, I recognise that point.

Let me return to the right hon. Lady's point about Liverpool. A further submission must, in most cases, be treated as a fresh application. It is not the case that the UK Border Agency does not provide support for people who cannot attend. Indeed, I recently met Scottish colleagues to discuss that point, given the geographical distances involved. Just as new applications that are not made at the port must be made at Croydon, a further submission, which is treated as a fresh application under the Court of Appeal rulings, must also, we think, be dealt with in person. To allow a fresh application to be dealt with by post would simply result in a further legacy backlog and further hardship and destitution.

Simon Hughes: The Minister knows, because I have worked closely with his colleagues to try to get a better system, that there is now a regional allocation of immigration staff in his Department who work with MPs in the regions of England and separately in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That suggests that a perfectly competent system could be arranged regionally to allow people to take in their application. Applications from MPs with further representations could still be considered, as all it would mean would be that people could come to MPs rather than having to go in person.

Mr. Woolas: My policy is to clear the backlog. My policy is that we should take decisions fairly and quickly, commensurate with fairness. I have looked at the Croydon figures as a result of the changes that we have made, and it is not the case that the number has fallen, as the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood has suggested. Indeed, the overall numbers applying at Croydon have diminished as we have cleared the backlog and got more on top of the situation.

Let me give examples of some of the policy measures that we have implemented.

Clare Short: To repeat the suggestion made by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), will the Minister please consider allowing pre-March 2007 applicants to take their new application to their regional or local office, where they have to go anyway every so often to sign on? That would overcome lots of the difficulties that I have just outlined.

Mr. Woolas: Let me outline some of the policy measures, because I think that I can address that point. When a failed asylum seeker asks us to reconsider their claim due to a change in their circumstances, in the past we simply have not dealt with them fast enough. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. By definition, as time goes on circumstances change. People's lives do not freeze as we consider the legacy. Dealing with the decisions quicker, but commensurate with fairness, is critical to our policy. We are achieving that. The backlog is being dealt with

[Mr. Woolas]

and decisions are being taken within our objective of 60 per cent. within six months. The figure of 40 per cent. is not because we are not fit for purpose, as some might say, but because some of the cases are inherently more complicated, particularly those that deal with families.

Our policy is that we have been working since 2005 to require asylum seekers to make initial claims in person. As the right hon. Lady rightly said, this October we brought the process for further submissions into line with that by introducing a requirement to make a further submission in person. The reason for that change is to make the system better. We cannot be asked to treat a further representation as a fresh application and then to deal with it by post, because there would be abuse, corruption and exploitation, which I have a responsibility to address.

The change helps to minimise the risk of fraud, because we often receive applications, or fresh representations, from people who are not the person in whose name the application is made. It also discourages abuse of the system by people who attempt to frustrate a removal. All of us know, from our experience as constituency MPs, that there are, sadly, people who attempt to frustrate the system. Out of fairness to genuine applicants and their rights, we have to address that issue. In making this change, we are reducing the incentive for individuals to make unfounded further submissions. Again, it cannot be denied that there are legions of unfounded further representations. Anyone who has looked at a case that has been strung along—sometimes for years, and often not to the benefit of the child where a child is involved—will know that that is the case.

The change helps to ensure that those who need our protection get it as early as possible, because it enables us to deal with cases more quickly. Are there exceptions and facilities for people to make further representations, or fresh applications if one takes the court's definition? That is the case if they genuinely cannot appear to make the application, and we consider such situations on a case-by-case basis. I believe that the House will find that the impact of this policy will not be what is feared; indeed, it will be the opposite.

The right hon. Lady has raised a number of points. I will check the Croydon figures and come back to her about what I recognise to be a critical point. If she is right and I am wrong, I will need to review the policy.

Simon Hughes: I do not wish to take up any more time, but I hope that the Minister will respond to me as well as to the right hon. Lady. This issue could be dealt with just as well and as efficiently, addressing all the relevant objectives, if it were dealt with regionally, without the huge disadvantage that the present system of going to Liverpool causes to individuals and their families. All the policy objectives could be achieved in that way, there would be face-to-face engagement and the system would be just as efficient.

Mr. Woolas: I do not rule out that possibility, and I see that point. I hesitate to say that the hon. Gentleman is being naive, but the system has been subject to frustration, to the detriment of genuine applicants. I have raised this issue with our directorates in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and we have mechanisms in place to allow what he suggests. If something positive can come out of this debate, I shall reconsider that point.

Let me briefly consider destitution. The idea that a Government—especially a Labour Government—would deliberately cause destitution genuinely worries people and must be taken seriously. Putting aside the asylum system, let us consider the Government's commitment to end rough sleeping. Of course, it has not ended completely, but a sea change has happened. The "no one left out" strategy has a goal of ending rough sleeping by 2012. The right hon. Lady raised some cases with me recently and I have looked at the figures. I recognise that the methodology might not be perfect and I am not so naive as to think that everyone who is destitute sleeps on the pavement. They may sleep in empty buildings or in places where our systems do not reach them, but there is significant evidence to show that rough sleeping has decreased significantly.

Now we get to the difficult matter of what to do when the end of the appeals system, the legal consideration and the decision making has been reached. Of course, if somebody has failed to be granted leave under the asylum system and cannot, through no fault of their own, return to their country, support is available. However, when that is not the case, we have a difficult dilemma. Are we to say that the taxpayer should continue supporting a person, when there is no obstacle to returning, especially given the voluntary return system, which our constituents criticise heavily? The easy political option for the Government would be to give in to those pressures and not provide support for the voluntary return system. Indeed, there have been several high profile cases recently, and I, with my colleagues' support, have resisted that pressure on us. The Refugee Integration and Employment Service and our work with the International Organisation for Migration—

10.31 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

House of Commons

Tuesday 8 December 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

QUEEN'S SPEECH (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

THE VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That Her Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 18th November, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received with great satisfaction the dutiful and loyal expression of your thanks for the speech with which I opened the present Session of Parliament.

I also have to inform the House that the Address of 2nd December praying that Her Majesty will appoint Professor Sir Ian Kennedy to the office of Chair of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the right hon. Lord Justice Scott Baker, Jackie Ballard, Ken Olisa and Professor Isobel Sharp to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request. The appointments of Professor Sir Ian Kennedy, Jackie Ballard, Ken Olisa and Professor Isobel Sharp became effective from 3rd December 2009. That of the right hon. Lord Justice Scott Baker will become effective from 12th January 2010.

BEVERLEY FREEMEN BILL [*LORDS*]

Bill read a Second time.

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Private Rented Housing

1. **Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress has been made on his Department's plans for the private rented housing sector. [304597]

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): We consulted over the summer on our response to the independent review of the private rented sector conducted by Julie Rugg. We received more than 250 responses, and I intend to publish a summary of them shortly.

Linda Gilroy: May I ask the Minister about the next steps? Might they include measures to address the concern that is felt in my area and others that contain a large amount of rented private sector student accommodation?

John Healey: They may include such measures. My hon. Friend will be aware that we have also consulted on proposals to strengthen local authorities' ability to deal with houses in multiple occupation, which sometimes give rise to the concern to which she refers. She will have to be a bit patient and wait for my summary, which will be available shortly to her and to all other Members throughout the House who take an interest in the issue.

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): There are 8 million people in the private rented sector. At present, if a landlord's property is repossessed, the first that such people know about it is when they come home to find that the locks have been changed. A succession of Ministers have promised to legislate. When will the Minister act? When will he take on mortgage lenders and keep his promise to tenants?

John Healey: In fact there are 3 million households in the private rented sector, not 8 million, but the hon. Lady has a point. The number is rising, and last year it was up to about one in seven.

The hon. Lady is rightly concerned about the position of those who may be renting from landlords who are struggling with their mortgages, and who may not be aware that those landlords are having problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) proposes to introduce a private Member's Bill, to which I am more than prepared to give every assistance and a fair wind because it constitutes exactly the sort of legislation that I think the hon. Lady wishes to see. I hope that, in the best tradition of private Members' Bills, it will receive support from Members in all parts of the House.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): May I suggest two measures that could be considered? First, the Government could try to persuade local authorities to become more proactive in dealing with the worst landlords, particularly through the use of discretionary licensing arrangements. Secondly, they could try to persuade institutional investors to invest for the long term in high-quality developments, and also in long-term management arrangements The properties should be built, and then there should be high-quality management.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is a member of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, and is one of the House's experts on these matters. He is right to suggest that local authorities have an important role which could be reinforced, allowing them to take action against the worst landlords who provide the worst housing, and we are considering doing exactly that. It is one of a number of actions that we need to take to bring the general standard of the private rented sector up to scratch.

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather), in May the Government pledged at the earliest opportunity to change the law and give tenants at least two months' notice if their landlords' properties were being repossessed. Here we are, six months later, and nothing has happened. Why have the Government not taken advantage of an amendment to the recent Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, and why did the Queen's Speech contain no measure to deal with the

problem? Do not the Department's own estimates show that 1,200 people will be evicted at short notice in the next year simply because the Government have failed to act? We now understand that they will have to do so via a private Member's Bill. Is that not the opposite to "Real help now"?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman recognises that primary legislation is required. Perhaps I can take it from his question that he and his party's Front-Bench team will support the private Member's Bill to be presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South-East—and if so, I warmly welcome that.

Thurrock Council

2. **Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock) (Lab): What recent discussions officials in his Department have had with representatives of Thurrock council on the posts of its chief executive and senior managers; and if he will make a statement. [304598]

The Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination (Ms Rosie Winterton): Officials from the Government office for the east of England discussed the appointment of a permanent chief executive and other matters with the leader and senior managers of Thurrock council on 9 November. In addition, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mr. Malik), will in his role as Minister with responsibility for the Thames Gateway meet the leader of the council on 9 December—tomorrow.

Andrew Mackinlay: Since 2004, there have been two permanent chief executives and three interim chief executives of Thurrock council, at enormous cost and loss to the taxpayer, and now there is an interim treasurer and an interim head of housing. There is a culture of paying off people to go away, without any real examination of that. Is it not time that there was publication and full disclosure of these top salaries in Thurrock council and other councils, and that a kick up the backside was delivered in order to get this dysfunctional council working properly?

Ms Winterton: I can tell my hon. Friend that the Audit Commission is conducting its "boomerang bosses" inquiry. I can also assure him that the Government have been taking a close interest in developments in Thurrock because of the matters he raises. We have put in a level of support through the Government office for the east of England and local government organisations, which are supporting the council and the interim chief executive. We are working closely with them to ensure that a permanent chief executive is appointed, and the Government office and the Audit Commission will continue to monitor whether more formal intervention is required.

Housing Transactions

3. **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): How many completed transactions there have been under the (a) mortgage rescue scheme, (b) homeowners mortgage support scheme and (c) rent to homebuy scheme. [304599]

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): By the end of September, there had been almost 100 completions under the special mortgage rescue scheme and 1,800 rent to homebuy completions. Homeowners mortgage support scheme figures will be published later this month.

Mr. Mackay: Even without the unpublished figure, which is presumably pretty bad, is this not a sad little tale? It is all hype, spin and nonsense. It is about spending taxpayers' money to set up schemes that have benefited hardly anybody. Would the Minister care to apologise?

John Healey: I am stunned. What on earth does the right hon. Gentleman say to the 100 families who are still in their own homes because of this special back-stop scheme? What does he say to the 1,000 families whose applications are in the pipeline? What does he say, too, to the 330,000 families who have had help across the range of advice from Government over the past year, which has helped them when they have been struggling with their mortgage repayments and helped them to stay in their own homes without running the risk of repossession, and which is testimony to the fact that this Government have been ready to act, unlike what happened in the 1990s? That is why repossessions are running at half the rate of the last recession.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): As the housing market recovers and house prices rise, there will be a temptation for some lenders who have hitherto exercised forbearance to move to repossess properties. Will the Minister ensure that the measures that have been put in place to protect home owners are kept in place until we are completely out of the woods, in order to avoid a second spike of repossessions?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our experience tells us and our forecasts say that, as the economy moves out of recession during next year, the pressure on repossessions will increase. I can do better than she urges me: we will not only look to keep the current support in place, but we will extend and strengthen it. We are extending the campaign that allows people to get access to free advice. We are toughening up the rules in court, too. Through the Financial Services Authority, we are also looking at toughening up the regulations on lenders, so that any repossession is genuinely a last resort. In this way, we can get ahead of the pressures we anticipate for next year, and try to ensure that more families are able to stay in their own home, which is where they should be, despite the pressures of recession.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): The Minister spoke of the need to extend and strengthen the schemes. Specifically, will the Department be looking at monitoring the impact that unsuccessful applications have on individuals? A constituent of mine took several months to make what was eventually an unsuccessful application. As a result, their personal financial circumstances were worse, not better. Does the Minister's Department not need to understand that impact, so that it can be sure it gets the scheme right?

John Healey: The hon. Lady did not mention which scheme she was talking about. I assume that it was the mortgage rescue scheme—

Julia Goldsworthy *indicated assent.*

John Healey: She might like to know that we have almost trebled the number of housing associations that are part of the scheme. We have a fast-track team in place that takes referrals directly from lenders and we are doing exactly as she urges—we are learning from the experience of the scheme so far and improving it so that it is better at providing the support that is needed. If the hon. Lady would let me have the details of her case, I shall certainly look into it.

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): The Minister is giving the House a lot of figures, so can we ask for one more? How many people to date have actually bought a home through the rent to homebuy scheme?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman might not have been listening when I gave my first answer. At the end of September, the figure was more than 1,800.

Mr. Goodman: We are very grateful to the Minister for that answer. Perhaps he will be able to tell us in a moment exactly how much that cost per person, given that expenditure on the scheme was £115 million.

The mortgage rescue scheme was meant to help up to 6,000 households at a cost of about £47,000 each. Since it has helped only 92 households to date, that works out at about £3 million per person helped. Is that the value for money that we can expect from tomorrow's pre-Budget report?

John Healey: I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. He was on the shadow Treasury team for a while, and perhaps we have seen why he is now on this team. He confuses expenditure with budgets. Not only have nearly 100 families stayed in their own homes because of the mortgage rescue scheme back-stop, but some 1,000 applications are in the pipeline and more than 11,000 families have had help and advice directly from their local authority that is part and parcel of the scheme. That is only part of the help that we have put in across the piece to help home owners who are struggling with their mortgages to stay where they should be—in their homes.

Sustainable Communities Act 2007

4. **Mr. Mark Lancaster** (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): What his timetable is for completing the implementation of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. [304600]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. John Denham): The Government are committed to implementing effectively the Sustainable Communities Act. I shall update the House later this month on how we are progressing with local spending reports. The timing of decisions on whether local proposals should be implemented will depend inevitably on the number and complexity of the proposals shortlisted.

Mr. Lancaster: Given that the Local Government Association is due to submit its proposals by the end of the month, can the Secretary of State not simply commit to making a final decision by the Easter recess?

Mr. Denham: We need to look at the proposals once they have been shortlisted by the LGA. As the hon. Gentleman says, they are due—this is my understanding, although it is not in my control—before the end of the year. We then need to assess the complexity and practicality of the schemes that are proposed.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): "Planning for Prosperous Economies"—planning policy statement 4—has a lot to say about sustainable communities and particularly about the viability and vitality of town centres. Will the Secretary of State say what the Government are doing to reaffirm a commitment to "town centre first" policies and adopt a presumption against out-of-town developments, which seem to be creeping back in, and whether there has been a definition of what is meant by "town centres"?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He will know that some years ago the Government introduced the planning guidance to which he refers with the intention of protecting town centres. Further development of that guidance is under discussion, as he will know, but I assure him that we remain as committed as we ever have been to the effective protection of town centres from unplanned and badly planned out-of-town shopping developments.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Yesterday, the Government published a Command Paper, "Smarter Government", in which the Prime Minister himself claimed to "put the frontline first" by allowing flexibility in local spending, yet nowhere in all 68 pages is there a single mention of local spending reports. Is it the Department for Communities and Local Government or, once again, the Treasury that has no interest in supporting this flagship policy of the Sustainable Communities Act?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Lady perhaps has not grasped the fact that the proposals for making data publicly available set out in the White Paper published yesterday are far more extensive and ambitious than those discussed when local spending reports were proposed. I made these points in a debate in the House just a few weeks ago. At that time I promised that, as we developed the work being led by Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Professor Nigel Shadbolt and his panel of experts on making local data widely available, we would not drop our commitment to developing local spending reports in the interim. That is why I shall bring forward our proposals setting out where we will go next on local spending reports, as I promised, before the end of the year.

Mrs. Spelman: There are of course only five sitting days left before the Christmas recess, but we look forward to receiving that information. There might have been no reference to local spending reports in the document, but there was a clear reference to arm's length bodies costing the taxpayer a massive £18 billion a year. What about asking those 750 quangos to reveal in local spending reports how much they spend, or would the Minister prefer taxpayers to be kept in the dark about how much money is wasted on central bureaucracy?

Mr. Denham: We have debated this point before. The hon. Lady regards the doubling of spending by the quango known as the Higher Education Funding Council

as a waste of money, but I do not. I believe that it is represented by a significant investment in universities and by opportunities for young people and older people. It is right that we want to bear down on costs and on salaries that are too high. In our previous debate on this issue, I undertook to bring forward another report on local spending reports, because I took the point that it would be useful for local spending reports to give access to available data from organisations such as the funding council and the Learning and Skills Council. The hon. Lady is quite wrong to say that every penny that is spent by an organisation that funds our universities is wasted money, but she keeps saying that.

Regeneration (Liverpool)

5. **Mr. Peter Kilfoyle** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What plans he has for the regeneration of north Liverpool. [304601]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. John Denham): Her Majesty's Government recognise the importance of regeneration in north Liverpool. There has been significant investment in the area, including £34 million of housing market renewal funding, £40 million to support business and create jobs, £18.4 million of European regional development funding, and £8.6 million through the future jobs fund, creating 1,320 jobs. I am also pleased that the £5.5 billion Liverpool Waters plan is moving forward, as is the £150 million Project Jennifer redevelopment of Great Homer street. We will continue to support the regeneration of north Liverpool.

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer, although I barely recognise the picture that he paints. May I invite him to visit my constituency to see for himself the result of 10 years of malign neglect under Liberal Democrat council control? While he is there, will he advise us on how Everton and Liverpool football clubs could be used to lever in the kind of regeneration funding that is still desperately needed, notwithstanding the roll of honour that he has just related?

Mr. Denham: I assure my hon. Friend that the investments that I have described either are or have been taking place or are anticipated in the future. I shall welcome the opportunity, if it arises, to go to his constituency; I always welcome an opportunity to inspect the malign neglect of Liberal Democrat councils.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) has just made clear, the regeneration of north Liverpool is intricately linked to the regeneration of Kirkby. Will my right hon. Friend welcome the efforts that are being made by Knowsley council, Tesco, the Government office for the north-west, the Northwest Regional Development Agency and the Minister for the North West, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas), to put together a modified application for the regeneration of Kirkby, which I hope will be presented to my right hon. Friend in due course?

Mr. Denham: I pay tribute to the efforts that my right hon. Friend has consistently made to support his constituency and regeneration. My decision on that planning application was taken on the basis of planning guidance, planning law and the conclusions of the inspector's report. However, I am very pleased that, following discussions with me, the Regional Minister and others are engaging with the council and others to see what is the best way forward for the regeneration of Kirkby.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

6. **Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on the licensing of houses in multiple occupation. [304602]

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): Since the introduction of the licensing provisions for houses in multiple occupation, councils in England have received applications for about 30,000 HMOs, and have issued licences for about 20,000.

Chris Ruane: I thank the Minister for his response. Last year, I asked Denbighshire county council how many HMOs it had licensed in a three-year period. The answer was just 33. After pressure, it has agreed to apply for additional and selective licensing, and next year it will start on licensing 433, taking the council from the worst to the best in the country. What lessons has the Minister learned from the Welsh experience in increasing the number of HMOs that are licensed?

John Healey: The whole House will have heard my hon. Friend and learned the lesson that local authorities that are prepared to tackle the worst landlords in their area, and to build up concentrations of HMOs that change its nature and character, are able to put in place additional licensing schemes. I am glad to hear about the successful campaign that he has run to persuade his council in that regard. That is precisely the way ahead, as we want councils to make maximum use of the provisions that are in place at present.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): Landlord licensing is one solution, but the use classes order is far more significant in many areas with concentrations of HMOs. Will the Minister give me an update on the progress of the Government's examination of that? Does he agree that restrictions on the number of HMOs in such areas will increase the balance of the community and be in the interests of all?

John Healey: Indeed, and that is why our general policy is to promote mixed communities, as they tend to be better balanced and more stable. The hon. Gentleman asked for an update on our examination of whether changes to the use classes might help us pursue our objectives. At present, we are sifting the 900 or so responses that we have received to the consultation, and I hope to be able to update the House on this shortly.

Gas Storage Facilities (Planning)

7. **Martin Linton** (Battersea) (Lab): What guidance his Department issues on the permitted distance between high-rise developments to gas storage facilities. [304603]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): Government circular 04/00, "Planning Controls For Hazardous Substances", provides that the Health and Safety Executive must be consulted on any proposed development near hazardous substances installations such as gasholders and that, in view of its acknowledged expertise, any advice from the HSE that planning permission should be refused should not be overridden without the most careful consideration.

Martin Linton: Is my hon. Friend aware that planning permission was granted in Wandsworth for a 42-storey tower only 18 metres from a gasholder? That was against the HSE's advice, which said that the risk from a fireball was "unacceptable" and 17 times higher than the level at which it would normally advise against. Is it not a matter of concern that planning committees have the power to disregard HSE advice even when it is expressed so strongly, and that it is so often left to public inquiries to assess the real risk to the public?

Mr. Ian Austin: We are working closely with the HSE to ensure that local planning authorities are fully informed about the advice available to assess risk around major hazards, and to make that advice more accessible. I cannot comment on the specific planning application that my hon. Friend has raised, but an inquiry into the development of the Ram brewery site in Wandsworth is currently under way. The inspector will submit his report and the Secretary of State will determine the application as soon he reasonably can.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I well understand the concern of the residents represented by the hon. Member for Battersea (Martin Linton), but what does the Minister have to say about the fact that we in Britain have only 15 days' strategic gas storage? That compares to 92 days in Germany and more than that in France. Elsewhere across the world we have large quantities of gas. What is Britain going to do to stimulate investment in gas storage, taking into account the concerns of residents such as those that have been raised?

Mr. Austin: That is probably a matter for the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman is written to. However, the question that he ought to be asking his Front Benchers is why the Conservative party continues to refuse planning applications for wind turbines.

FiReControl Project

8. **James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend, East) (Con): What his most recent estimate is of the cost of the FiReControl project. [304604]

12. **Christopher Fraser** (South-West Norfolk) (Con): What his most recent estimate is of the cost of the FiReControl project. [304608]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Shahid Malik): The estimated cost of delivering the FiReControl project is £420 million.

James Duddridge: At the start of this debacle in March 2004 we were told that tried and tested methods would be used for IT, and that the project would be done and dusted by November 2007. There has been a little bit of slippage on the time scale, but is the Minister serious and does he stand by the words of his predecessors? Was the IT really tried and tested, because that clearly does not seem to be the case?

Mr. Malik: The case for FiReControl is absolutely compelling—[Hon. Members: "No, it is not!"] It is interesting, because I met representatives of the Chief Fire Officers Association only last week, which is as committed to FiReControl as ever. The idea that the Opposition are better placed to talk about national resilience in the context of the fire service than the CFOA is frankly laughable. FiReControl will improve national resilience and bring unprecedented levels of co-operation and interoperability—*[Interruption.]* That is a difficult word as well. For the first time, we shall have a national network with nine regional control centres, all of which will be able to operate at peak times in a way that we have never seen before.

Christopher Fraser: Given the vast over-cost and the considerable delay, does the Minister believe that taxpayers are seeing value for money?

Mr. Malik: We would not have engaged in the project if we did not believe that it was value for money. All the major stakeholders believe that it is value for money. Sometimes I think that the Conservatives seem to know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The set-up costs of the FiReControl project are already £400 million over budget, the project is years behind schedule and the Local Government Association and the Chief Fire Officers Association—previous supporters of the Government on the project—are bailing out. In his written statement of 15 July, the Minister promised to underwrite all pre-cutover upfront costs of the project. Is he still in a position to meet that undertaking?

Mr. Malik: We are fully committed to ensuring that FiReControl is achieved as set out. The idea that there is a £400 million overspend is so far off the mark that it is frightening. The reality is that when rescheduling took place in July this year the cost went up from £380 million to £420 million. Those costs will all be reaped back from EADS via royalties and a reduced fee for FiReControl operations.

Public Service Delivery

9. **Mr. Michael Clapham** (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of local authorities in delivery of local public services. [304605]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. John Denham): Local government has improved significantly during the past decade. It plays a key role in local areas, ensuring that citizens receive high-quality public services from all local providers. In yesterday's White Paper we announced increases in flexibility and reductions in bureaucracy, which will

help fulfil that role more effectively. Tomorrow, we will see the first comprehensive area assessment results, which will provide transparent information, enabling citizens to hold local service providers to account.

Mr. Clapham: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer, but does he agree that in localities such as the Barnsley metropolitan borough council area the regional development agency plays a very important part in ensuring that the effectiveness of local authority services is improved, by being able to focus on the wider issues of transport and employment to help in creating the jobs that Barnsley needs so much?

Mr. Denham: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That is exactly the role that regional development agencies play. In many other ways, they support growth and the improvement of public services, which is why the CBI, the House Builders Federation and many others are so appalled at Conservative proposals to abolish regional development agencies and the essential role they play.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is the Secretary of State not completely right to say that local authorities have improved enormously over the past few years, because most of them are now Tory-controlled?

Mr. Denham: The reason why local authority services have improved is that real spending and real investment by central Government in local authorities has improved by 37 per cent. over the past 10 years. That is a sharp contrast with the 7 per cent. real-terms reduction when the Conservatives were last in power. Local government has improved because for the first time there has been comprehensive and effective inspection and accountability of those services, and I am proud of the role that this Government have played with local councils of all parties in improving the quality of services to local people.

Council Housing

10. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): How many local authorities (a) submitted successful bids in round 1 and (b) have submitted bids in round 2 of the Government's council housing new build programme. [304606]

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): Forty-nine local authorities were successful in bidding for grant to build new council homes. All are set to start on site, with 217 schemes, before the end of March, which makes it the largest council house building programme for nearly two decades. The deadline for round 2 submissions was the end of October, and I hope to make announcements on successful bidders early in the new year.

Clive Efford: May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent work in making resources available for council house building? However, he will be aware of speculation about the demand for those resources, so will he consider making a statement to support new bids for council housing where the demand for resources outstrips what has been allocated so far?

John Healey: My hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about those matters, is right. The level of interest and the number of bids that we have had for the second round of the council house building programme has certainly been greater than that which we received for the first. When I announced the £1.5 billion of extra funding in the housing pledge, I made it clear that the four elements of that pledge, and the budgets allocated against them back in the summer, included the capacity to flex some of that spend between those parts of the programme, and I am certainly ready to do so if there is a good case.

Mr. Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): This Labour Government have let down the poor in so many ways, but I shall not mention spiralling youth unemployment, falling educational standards or, indeed, failing public health. Instead, I want to ask why this Labour Government have built fewer affordable houses than were built in any year of the previous Conservative Administration. Why is that? Why have this Government let down the poor on housing?

John Healey: May I say that this Labour Minister in this Labour Government is pleased to have been able to offer the hon. Gentleman's Tory council money to build council homes, which are needed in the East Riding of Yorkshire just as they are throughout the rest of the country.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): When the Mayor of London published his draft housing strategy, he tore up the commitment to make 50 per cent. of all new homes affordable, saying that his target of producing units would help us to deliver more affordable housing. Given that this week it has been announced that he will miss that target, too, will my right hon. Friend have urgent discussions about how we can deliver the much-needed homes to tackle overcrowding and homelessness in London?

John Healey: The jury is very much out on Mayor Johnson and the pledges he made more than 18 months ago. In housing, more than any other area, there is a big shortfall if we compare what he promised in the run-up to his election with what he has been able to deliver so far to meet the very serious housing needs that exist throughout the capital.

Home Information Packs

11. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of home information packs on the housing market since their introduction. [304607]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): We are currently working up proposals to evaluate the effectiveness of the HIPs programme, and we expect the results to be available in 2010. However, early independent research undertaken by Europe Economics and published in November 2007 concluded that the introduction of HIPs would not have a negative impact on the housing market.

Mr. Robathan: Let me add my voice to the research, because all my constituents tell me that they find the HIPs to be—[Hon. Members: "All?"] Those constituents who raised the matter with me tell me that they find HIPs to be untimely, expensive, bureaucratic and, really, a waste of time. They quite like the energy performance certificates, so will the Government realise the error of their ways, realise what a waste of time—time, effort and money—the process has been, and scrap it?

Mr. Austin: The hon. Gentleman does not need to ask ludicrous questions like that to confirm to the House that he is not exactly the sharpest tool in the box. *[Interruption.]* However, thousands of jobs and hundreds of small businesses depend on the HIP process. Some 13,000 people—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I realise that there is some enjoyable badinage, but I actually want to get down the Order Paper and reach some questioners lower down. I know that Members will want to take that into account—rudeness notwithstanding.

Mr. Austin: Thousands of jobs and hundreds of small businesses depend on the HIP process. Some 13,000 people have invested thousands in training as energy assessors, so the Opposition need to explain why they would put all those jobs and all those businesses at risk, and the hon. Gentleman needs to explain to all the people in his constituency whose livelihoods depend on that process why he wants to put them out of work.

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): Does the Minister not realise that most house purchasers would far rather rely on searches and inquiries carried out on their behalf by a solicitor of their choice than by a home information pack provider, of whom they know nothing?

Mr. Austin: The Leader of the Opposition swans off to the Arctic to hang around with huskies, but the hon. Gentleman and the Opposition are showing today why nobody will take seriously anything they say about climate change. As a result of HIPs, 2 million home owners now have an energy assessment and energy recommendations that can help them to cut their fuel bills by up to £300 and reduce carbon emissions. Is it not extraordinary that even today, as the world gathers in Copenhagen, the Opposition are still committed to abolishing the HIP, which is one of the main ways of helping home owners to cut carbon emissions and tackle climate change?

Local Housing Development

13. **Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory** (Wells) (Con): What recent representations he has received from district councils on the effect of planning policy statement 25 on local housing development. [304609]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): No recent representations of this nature have been received by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The tragic events of the past few weeks underline the importance of reducing flood risk to new development. Planning policy statement 25 provides a robust policy framework for local planning authorities to avoid, manage and reduce flood risk to new development, as endorsed by Sir Michael Pitt in his review of the lessons learned from the 2007 floods published last year.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Is the Minister aware that the Somerset levels are low-lying and very prone to flooding, both from the sea and from river water? Why, therefore, have the Government placed almost the whole of my constituency in flood zone 3, which will prevent almost all development, including housing development, while failing to provide funding or means for flood relief? Does the dull instrument on the Treasury Bench—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister can deal with the point now.

Mr. Austin: This is a very important issue. That is why we have produced a clear, strengthened planning policy statement, PPS25, to reduce flood risk to new development and to deliver safely, without exposing people to unnecessary flood risk, the level of house building we want to see. I am not aware of the particular circumstances in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I would be happy to meet him to discuss that in more detail.

House Building Targets

14. **Bob Spink** (Castle Point) (Ind): What account the Government took of the economic situation in setting their targets for house building. [304610]

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): There has long been a mismatch between the supply and building of new homes and the demand for those homes. That mismatch led the Government to consider and set the house building targets in the first place. Clearly, the situation has got worse as a result of the global economic downturn, with the demand and need for housing continuing to grow and, particularly in the private sector, the level of building falling through the floor. That is why we stepped in over the summer to put extra money—£1.5 billion—into building the homes we need right across the country.

Bob Spink: But surely the economic crisis and the subsequent fall in net immigration that we saw as a consequence has caused a reduction in forecast demand for new housing need. Can the Minister therefore now reduce the target for new housing need so that we can increase the protection of our green belt, which is most important to our constituents?

John Healey: I said a moment ago that there was a long-term mismatch between the houses we are building and the demand and need for them. Taken over the long term, that continues. Migration is cyclical. It is a relatively small part, but a part nevertheless, of the projections of the need for housing in future. A bigger factor is demographic change in our own country, with the number of households increasing, people growing older and living for longer, and the need for greater mobility within Britain. We are trying to ensure that we can build the homes to meet those factors in future.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right—there is a mismatch. The mismatch in Chorley is between lots of house building but no social housing; the council collects section 106 money for

social housing but never spends it. What is he going to do to ensure that social housing is provided in the Chorley constituency?

John Healey: I am disappointed to hear my hon. Friend's report about his local council and the attitude it is taking towards affordable housing. I have to say that this is not the first time I have been disappointed to hear his reports about Chorley borough council. There is a great deal more that it can and should do to ensure that the affordable homes needed in his constituency are provided. It can play a much greater role in that, and I hope he will not cease in his campaign to try to ensure that it does so.

Flood Risk (Planning)

15. **Mr. Eric Illsley** (Barnsley, Central) (Lab): If he will require local planning authorities to act on objections by the Environment Agency to planning applications on the grounds of the risk of flooding. [304611]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): Again, the terrible events of the past few weeks underline the importance of these issues. Our planning policy requires local planning authorities to re-consult the Environment Agency where the agency objects to a planning application on flood risk grounds. This is backed by a direction requiring planning authorities to provide the Secretary of State with the opportunity to intervene where the agency sustains an objection to major development proposals.

Mr. Illsley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. I recently read a briefing which said that about a quarter of local authorities were ignoring Environment Agency recommendations against developments in areas prone to flooding. Does that cause him some concern?

Mr. Austin: This issue will concern many members of the public, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise it. We have made the Environment Agency a statutory consultee on planning applications in areas at risk of flooding. The figures I have suggest that in about 97 per cent. of cases in which the agency objects on flood risk grounds, the final decision is in line with its advice. I know how seriously he takes these matters, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss in more detail the figures that he has.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): Will the Minister go further and join in our calls to make water companies statutory consultees as well, to ensure that where there are major new developments, sewage can fit into waste water pipes to prevent future flooding?

Mr. Austin: I have not considered that issue, but I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady and talk about it in more detail.

Business Rates (Public Houses)

16. **Chloe Smith** (Norwich, North) (Con): If he will conduct an impact assessment on the effect on public houses and other businesses of the 2010 business rates revaluation. [304612]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Barbara Follett): Regular revaluations are a statutory part of the business rates system and as such do not require impact assessments. However, we have carefully considered the impact of the 2010 revaluation on businesses, including public houses, and are introducing a £2 billion transitional relief scheme for the minority facing increases. An impact assessment of that scheme has been conducted and was published on 17 November. From 1 April, we will also offer extra help to individual public houses in rural areas by increasing their rateable value relief threshold from £10,500 to £12,500.

Chloe Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does she not agree that it is irresponsible not to conduct a full impact assessment on such policies, especially in the case in question? The distortions that accrue from using April 2008 property figures may bake property boom prices into business rates for pubs in urban areas and businesses next door to them.

Barbara Follett: The hon. Lady is quite correct to point out that the system contains problems, as it values properties backwards so that the 2008 values are reflected in the 2010 figures. That is exactly why the multiplier is set at a 17-year low of 15 per cent., and why we have implemented a transitional rate relief scheme this year and had an impact assessment.

Topical Questions

T1. [304623] **Simon Hughes** (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. John Denham): I want to ensure that councils are performing as efficiently as possible and making the best possible use of every pound of council tax. I am pleased to be able to confirm today that councils have forecast efficiency savings of more than £3 billion by March 2010, making good progress towards the target of £5.5 billion by March 2011. "Smarter Government", published yesterday, sets out how Government will support councils in continuing to deliver improved services with improved value for money.

Simon Hughes: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Many people in communities such as Southwark and Bermondsey live near major developments from which they get no necessary personal gain. Will he look sympathetically on the proposal to allow development gain money, traditionally called section 106 money, to be used to build or renovate housing for rent in the area affected?

Mr. Denham: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. He will be aware that we are already committed to the development of a more flexible and strategic approach to development gain. We will introduce the community infrastructure levy to supplement and replace section 106, which will give local authorities greater flexibility in the use of development gain money.

T5. [304627] **Chris McCafferty** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State tell the House what steps he is taking to reduce carbon emissions in the existing

housing stock, particularly in houses such as those in my constituency in which there is no possibility of cavity wall insulation?

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): My hon. Friend is quite right to say, particularly in this week as we build up to the Copenhagen international conference on climate change, that we need to do a great deal more with our homes in future. More than a quarter of our total emissions in this country come from our homes, which requires us to design, build and plan to a new standard in future—I have set out in some detail the plans from 2016 on—and to undertake a national refurb programme, the details of which I and my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government and for Energy and Climate Change are currently working on following the heat and energy saving strategy, which we published earlier in the year.

T2. [304624] **Sandra Gidley** (Romsey) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to protect agricultural land for future food use? If so, what steps will he take to prevent allotments being included in local authority development plans?

Mr. Denham: I think the hon. Lady would agree with me that local authorities need to be able to draw up appropriate development plans for their areas. I am not sure whether she is suggesting that we should specifically limit the way in which they approach these issues, but we are working with third-sector organisations in this area to promote the importance of allotments and to encourage local authorities to make allotment land available. I share with her the view that adequate provision of allotments is a very beneficial thing for local authorities to include in their local planning.

T6. [304628] **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley) (Lab): The market in the historic market town of Chorley is under threat from a new Asda being built in the town centre. I welcome the Asda jobs, but I am concerned that this will have a dire effect on the market and the small independent retailers. What help and support can this Government give to ensure that markets will survive, along with the independent shops?

The Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination (Ms Rosie Winterton): I know my hon. Friend has a historic market in his constituency—I think it dates back to the 15th century. It is not quite as old as Doncaster market, but it is still a very valuable one. Under the draft planning guidance—planning policy statement 4—it is possible for local authorities to look very closely at the effect that, for example, an out-of-town development would have on the market. Such effects could include social and economic effects, and perhaps consumer choice would be reduced. That, plus the ability to look much more closely, under the economic assessment duty that is being introduced, at what can be done to assist local markets better are new powers that are being given to local authorities. We also have a retail markets group, which I chair, which will be reporting to Ministers with more ideas as to what we can do.

T3. [304625] **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): Following my earlier question, the Housing Minister responded to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) by saying that 1,800 homes had been purchased through the rent-to-homebuy scheme. That seems at variance with the written answer the Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) on 16 October, when he said that the number was zero. Has the Minister inadvertently misled the House and would he perhaps like to put the record straight?

John Healey: I do not believe so. The right hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends on the Front Bench indicated their question on that matter earlier. If the right hon. Gentleman consults the record, he will see that in response to his original question, I said that up to the end of September, about 1,800 rent-to-homebuys had been completed—I did not use the word "purchased". However, I have indicated to Conservative Front Benchers that I will check the record, particularly in relation to the second exchange between myself and the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman). If I made a mistake the second time around, I shall clearly correct it, but if the right hon. Gentleman consults the record, I think he will find what I have explained now, and I am grateful to him for the opportunity to do so.

T8. [304630] **Ms Karen Buck** (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): The most recent homelessness statistic published by the Department for Communities and Local Government shows a continued fall in the number of acceptances as homeless by local authorities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is no such thing as a free lunch? Is he aware that in the case of approximately half the homelessness diversions in the private rented sector, we are substituting affordable social housing for astronomical rents in the private rented sector? Will he continue urgent discussions with the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions to make it clear that that is not actually a sustainable and efficient use of money over the longer term?

John Healey: Indeed I will; my hon. Friend has been very forceful in making that point to me and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, so we will certainly do so.

T4. [304626] **Christopher Fraser** (South-West Norfolk) (Con): In answer to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith), did the Minister say that the transitional rate relief will cover in full the increases proposed over the next five years, or does she finally accept that the increases will be unbearable for many businesses?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Barbara Follett): I certainly accept that it will not cover all of them, but in most cases it will cover a percentage of the increases. Also, under the business rates deferral scheme, businesses will be able to extend their payments over a period of three years.

T9. [304631] **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the earlier answer given to me about the planning of town centre developments, the handling of much needed major commercial proposals for the heart of Coalville by Tory North-West Leicestershire district council has been an utter fiasco.

Will the Minister press the Government office for the east midlands to respond to my urgent request for a call-in, because to describe the present position as a dog's breakfast would be a grossly unfair slur on canine eating habits?

Mr. Denham: I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes. Obviously, call-in proposals are considered by Ministers on the basis of the case that is made, but he has made his views very clear this afternoon.

Mr. David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Does the Minister not understand that the transitional relief scheme will not mitigate the huge business rate hike for businesses in my high street, which face an increase of 120 per cent. in their liability? Is this not the wrong time to push through a revaluation based on 2008 inflated prices, when many of my businesses are struggling to cope in the recession?

Barbara Follett: May I suggest to hon. Members whose businesses are rightly concerned about business rate increases—there are increases, although the majority of businesses will see a decrease as a result of the 2010 revaluation—that they go on to the Business Link and the Valuation Office Agency websites and make the calculation, because there is a cap on the increases? For small businesses, the cap is 5 per cent. and on large businesses it is 12.5 per cent. If we take into account negative inflation, that drops to 3.5 per cent. and 11 per cent. I am very sorry that businesses are getting so concerned about this when measures are in place to help them with it.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): What measures are the Department taking to protect council tax payers against botched asset sales such as those we saw under the previous Government, and which Plymouth city council has now embarked on with its sale of Plymouth City Bus? The figures appear not to stack up.

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course the Government do not oppose asset sales per se, but they have to be carried out properly, in the public interest and with the values properly established to ensure that the council tax payer does not lose out. I hope that her council is not like Southampton council, whose leader said a few months ago that the council would privatise for ideological reasons. That is not the way to approach such an important issue.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): In light of the economic downturn and the reduction in new homes being built, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of models such as the Milton Keynes tariff in delivering development for local communities?

John Healey: We looked at this very carefully when we were considering proposals that were part of the Planning Act 2008 and the community infrastructure levy. Shortly, I will be able to set out final decisions and regulations to put that levy in place from 1 April. While the hon. Gentleman is right about the fall-off in building new homes for private sale, he is wrong about the reduction in building for affordable homes. Because of the action the Government have taken, that number is up.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The Electoral Administration Act 2006 made tens of millions of pounds in additional, unhypothecated funding available to the Department for Communities and Local Government for electoral registration. Can the Minister guarantee that all the money given to the Department for electoral registration was spent on that, and can he liaise with the Ministry of Justice to ensure that proper funding is available for that purpose?

Ms Rosie Winterton: A certain amount of money is given to the Electoral Commission to look at electoral registration, and that is closely monitored. On discussions with the Ministry of Justice, I shall pass on my hon. Friend's comments and get back to him.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): May I take the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin), back to home improvement packs? Will he put his undoubted, enormous intellectual talent, of which you will be aware, Mr. Speaker, to answering a simple question, without resorting to his trademark personal abuse? What proportion of home buyers and sellers, when surveyed, responded that they found the HIP useful?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): The hon. Gentleman spent half an hour dreaming up that question, which confirms the point that I made about him earlier. The figures to which he refers actually show that already, in such a short period, nine out of 10 buyers are using the HIPs and one out of three said that it had helped them to decide whether to make an offer. *[Interruption.]* That is a massive improvement on the figures shortly after the HIPs introduction— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I feel sure that the outbreak of disorder on the one hand, and the presence of the Under-Secretary and the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) on the other, are entirely unrelated.

Mr. Austin: Those figures are a big improvement on the position shortly after the HIPs introduction and show that the system is becoming more helpful to home buyers all the time.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I seek your guidance on a matter relating to the accuracy of the official record? In the debate on the Queen's Speech on 25 November, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, when speaking about Government action, said, "It is bringing unemployment down." There was some reaction in the Chamber, given that unemployment has been rising for many months. She did not resile from that statement, but the official record does not include those words. It includes a softer version. May I seek your guidance, Mr. Speaker, on how I can ensure that the words that the Secretary of State said are the words that appear on the record?

Mr. Speaker: I say to the right hon. Lady that I shall happily check the record, and I shall come back to her when I have done so. I am grateful to her for her point of order.

Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I wrote to you on Friday about this matter. I seek assurances that no decision by the Members Estimate Committee, or subsequent decision by the House reliant on the MEC's recommendations, will prejudice a Member's right to challenge a final decision, relating to so-called paybacks or restitution, in a court of law or an employment tribunal, that no deductions from salary or allowances will be attempted in respect of those payments until its legality is demonstrated in a process that is independent of the House of Commons and its Officers, and that such deductions should not be made until a Member has had the opportunity to test the issue of repayment in a court of law or employment tribunal.

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The matter that he raises on the Floor of the House this afternoon by this device is one that he has raised with me in correspondence. I am grateful to him for that. I can only say to him today that the issues of concern to him are properly matters for discussion in the Members Estimate Committee, which will meet next week. He can be assured that the concerns that he has raised with me will be relayed to colleagues on the Committee and will be considered.

Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

Disability Benefits for the Elderly

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.33 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the vital support that attendance allowance and disability living allowance provide for people with disabilities; notes that these benefits are intended to meet the additional costs of living with an impairment or long-term health condition; further notes with concern that approximately 2.87 million people in the UK who receive disability living allowance or attendance allowance are not eligible for social care services; acknowledges that some 20,000 individuals have petitioned the Prime Minister and many more have petitioned individual hon. and right hon. Members to ensure that these benefits are secured; welcomes the Government's announcement that disability living allowance for people under 65 years will not be scrapped; and urges the Government to ensure that attendance allowance and disability living allowance for people aged 65 years and over are secured and not abolished as part of any future reform of the social care system.

The House will no doubt be aware that the motion is in exactly the same terms as early-day motion 1.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Bless you!

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman reminds me—I was going to say this anyway—that early-day motion 1 stands in his name and that of 105 other hon. Members. I claim no authorship of the early-day motion, as he will no doubt verify. He composed it no doubt. He might have done so with others, but he did not compose it in direct association with me. None the less, I was happy to sign it, and I and my colleagues agree with it.

Bob Russell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am also grateful to the charity Scope, which provided the background. I readily put on the record the fact that Scope is the organisation that helped me. When the vote comes later, I look forward to seeing the 41 Labour MPs who have signed early-day motion 1 voting for what it says in the Lobby.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has provided that confirmation and that he has referred to the cross-party nature of the support for his early-day motion, which is represented by all parties in the House. Because it relates to benefits, which are a United Kingdom matter, Members other than those from England alone have had occasion to sign it.

For some years we have made it clear that we need a consensus about how we can achieve sustainable and high-quality social care for the longer term. We have had years in which reports have come and gone, including the royal commission on long-term care, the long-term care charter, the Wanless report, which was produced for the King's Fund, and the Green Paper, which was published in July. As I made clear to the Secretary of State at this Dispatch Box when he made a statement accompanying the Green Paper on 14 July, I am quite clear that I do not regard the Green Paper as providing

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a sufficient range of options on the basis of which we can take forward the future of long-term care and, in particular, the funding of it.

On page 15 of the Green Paper, the Government said:

"In developing the new system, we think there is a case for drawing some funding streams together to enable us to deliver the new and better care and support system we want to create. We think we should consider integrating some elements of disability benefits, for example Attendance Allowance, to create a new offer for individuals with care and support needs."

When the Green Paper was published, it asked people a number of questions—Members will no doubt recall the questions that were set out in chapter 7—but none of them asked whether the organisations and individuals responding to the Green Paper thought that it was a good idea to transfer attendance allowance and other disability benefits into the funding of the national care service.

I do not know whether a Minister or the Secretary of State wants to let us know about this, but on the face of it, the implication of using attendance allowance as an example of disability benefits—in the plural—in the Green Paper is that other benefits would also be included. We have assumed, as have others, including disability organisations generally, that it would be wholly discriminatory and perverse for the attendance allowance to be withdrawn and incorporated into the funding of the national care service, and for that not to be the case in relation to disability living allowance for those beyond the age of 65. I will continue on the basis that we are essentially talking about those two benefits for that purpose, unless Ministers were to tell us otherwise.

With the exception of the "pay for yourself" option, each option in the Green Paper implies the integration of those disability benefits into the funding of the national care service. Notwithstanding the fact that the Green Paper did not ask a specific question about this, we know that many organisations and individuals who responded highlighted the implication that is set out in the Green Paper and responded to it. I therefore invite the Secretary of State to tell us what proportion of the Green Paper responses received up to 12 November supported incorporating attendance allowance and disability living allowance into the national care service. I wonder whether Ministers know the answer to that. *[Interruption.]* Apparently not.

Let me help Ministers on this subject. On the Downing street website, as we now know, there are opportunities to petition the Government on the subject, and 24,000 people have now signed such a petition—the sixth most popular petition on the Prime Minister's website—expressing their opposition to the proposal. The Disability Alliance asked its members whether they supported the proposal to absorb attendance allowance into care budgets, and 93 per cent. said that they did not. The Parkinson's Disease Society asked the same question, and 95 per cent. were opposed. Carers UK asked the same question, and 96 per cent. were opposed.

Age UK, which incorporates Age Concern and Help the Aged, said in response to the Green Paper:

"We oppose funding the National Care Service from Attendance Allowance…We do not feel that the proposals will provide a system that sufficiently replicates the very important role that Attendance Allowance plays in promoting independence."

I note from the debate on the Queen's Speech in another place that the Minister, when challenged on who supported the options in the Green Paper, quoted Carers UK in a general sense, but not its response to the Green Paper that stated:

"We are concerned and against the proposal to take Attendance Allowance and place it into local care budgets. We believe that this will disenfranchise and impoverish carers and their families."

The Parkinson's Disease Society said in response to the Green Paper that

"our findings warn the Government that scrapping Attendance Allowance and other disability benefits could be detrimental to the independence of people with Parkinson's."

Macmillan Cancer Support said that

"we are strongly opposed to the proposal…to merge the Attendance Allowance funding stream with current social care funding streams to pay for the new National Care Service."

It is important for us to recognise why these organisations feel so strongly about this. The arguments against using this mechanism for funding the care service are compelling, not least because attendance allowance and disability living allowance were not introduced simply to pay for the costs of personal care. They were intended to compensate for the high living costs associated with disability, and not simply to provide for specific care needs.

The White Paper that introduced disability living allowance stated clearly that it was for

"better coverage of assistance with the extra costs of being disabled".

There are also costs that are distinct from, and additional to, social care needs, as described in the Green Paper. That is precisely why disability living allowance and attendance allowance payments have never been calculated on the basis of what is required to provide for social care needs. Rather, they have been calculated on the basis of what might add to the overall cost of disability. They were never intended to provide enough to pay for a professional care service, and it would be wrong to take them as being designed for that purpose. If Ministers were to proceed in the direction indicated in the Green Paper, it would constitute a fundamental change in the purpose and definition of disability benefits.

There is ample evidence of the costs that those benefits go to meet, and they go far beyond being strictly associated with the costs of social care. The Green Paper describes the kind of personal needs involved. They include washing, help with eating and toileting, and so on, but what is provided for and supported by disability benefits goes far beyond that. The benefits are not just spent on direct care services; they have had a big impact on people's lives. They pay for additional heating costs, different diets, and a whole range of support for informal and family carers.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is raising some serious issues in a measured and thoughtful way, but is not that at odds with the way in which his party has approached this issue, in its scaremongering towards existing recipients? I have here a copy of the template for the press release for Conservative party candidates, which carries the words:

"(name), (position)—insert here—voiced (his/her) opposition".

It says that

"an average of £3,400 a year will be snatched away from 2.4 million pensioners".

Can he confirm that that figure refers to the current recipients of those benefits? Is it not the case that the Government have said that that money will not be snatched away?

Mr. Lansley: Of course, the hon. Gentleman has never in his life issued a press release prepared by his own central headquarters. Age UK, which he will acknowledge is an organisation encompassing Age Concern and Help the Aged, has said:

"Without any detail in the public domain people are right to fear the worst".

The problem with that—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Jonathan Shaw) *rose*—

Mr. Lansley: No, I am answering the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb). I will come to this point and set it out in detail.

Ministers have said in the Green Paper that, within the national care service, they are proposing to withdraw these benefits from existing recipients and to provide what they describe as equivalent support. However, it is entirely unclear what equivalent support means in this context. The hon. Member for Northavon makes exactly the point that I am making. If one is currently in receipt of disability benefits and what one spends the money on includes—the Disability Alliance has conducted research on this—attending hospital or medical appointments, the cost of transport, support with housework and gardening, higher heating and water bills and a whole range of other things, only 24 per cent. of the money is actually spent on care services as such, so the fact that one is having this income taken away and having personal care services provided does not mean receiving equivalent support—it means receiving something different.

Jonathan Shaw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he needs a break, as he is not doing very well at the moment—he can check the *Hansard*. Let me inform the House that existing claimants in receipt of attendance allowance and disability living allowance would see no cash loss in their benefits during a transitional process to a new system. If he were part of a Conservative Government, is he saying that he would never rule out making any changes to AA or DLA for pensioners?

Mr. Lansley: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman did exactly the same thing yesterday: he came before the House and—

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): Just answer the question.

Mr. Lansley: I am just answering the question. Instead of talking from a sedentary—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must say to Mr. Hope that there has been quite a lot of sedentary chuntering taking place. I know that there are strong feelings on these matters, but the effect of this sort of chuntering is to crowd out Back Benchers and I want there to be plenty of time for Back-Bench contributions, which I hope means mercifully brief Front-Bench speeches.

Mr. Lansley: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I shall, of course, be as brief as the argument allows, but I tend to allow Members to make interventions and I am certainly happy to respond to them.

The Minister kept saying yesterday in response to questions that those who are currently entitled to these benefits would, under the Government's proposals, receive the same "cash support", but the amendment to the motion does not say that. It states that

"those receiving the affected benefits at the time of reform would continue to receive an equivalent level of support",

which is the same language used in the Green Paper and the same language used by Health Ministers in responses to questions. There is a complete difference between those two things. If it is cash, what is the point of taking away a cash benefit from people in order to give them the cash back? If it is not cash and it is paying for the national care service, our precise point is that there will be a difference between what people use disability benefits to pay for now and what will be provided to them as personal care services under a national care service. There is a major discontinuity between those two things, which Ministers do not seem to understand at all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Lansley: I give way to the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor).

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb), it is a full 20 weeks since the publication of the Green Paper and the start of the present campaign on attendance allowance and disability living allowance, so will the hon. Gentleman confirm the rumour that the leader of his party will sack the head of the section for opportunism and scaremongering in Tory party headquarters for tardiness and incompetence?

Mr. Lansley: I am astonished at the meaning or purpose of that intervention. The hon. Gentleman signed early-day motion 1, and what we have tabled for debate on the Order Paper today is couched in exactly the same terms and it seems to me to be perfectly reasonable.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): My constituents have a simpler concern than the one about how the Conservatives choose to organise their party. If the Conservatives form a Government, will the hon. Gentleman give an assurance that my elderly and disabled constituents would not be materially worse off? I am more concerned about the sums, however delivered, than the process of delivery, and I am sure that my constituents are, too.

Mr. Lansley: I think the hon. Gentleman is right that people are concerned about that, and I am glad that he also signed the early-day motion, which makes an important point. I do not know why the Government should think that our argument is just about those currently in receipt of attendance allowance and disability living allowance, as we are debating what should be the long-term future of social care. The Green Paper was not about what is going to happen in the next six months, but about what ought to happen in the longer term. I am looking to find out what should happen in the long term for obvious reasons. I am making clear on behalf of my party our belief that the continuation of disability benefits, such as attendance allowance and disability

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living allowance in their current form, will give current recipients of such benefits and those who will be recipients in the future an opportunity, on a non-means-tested basis, to gain access to cash benefits that will enable them to buy a wide range of services such as informal care, family care, support for travel and support for house improvements on the basis of their own personal choice and control.

I find it astonishing that today is the day on which the Department for Work and Pensions chose to publish a document relating to other disability benefits, entitled "Making choice and control a reality for disabled people". It is clear from that document that the reason the Government did not include attendance allowance, for example, in the "right to control" policy is that it is already a cash benefit. People receiving a cash benefit gain personalisation and choice, but if a Government were to withdraw direct access to that cash benefit and distribute it through the national care service, by definition they would create a lack of personalisation.

I have always considered that to be an agreed common objective. It has been our objective since the 2006 White Paper, and the Government have also moved in the direction of direct payments and personal budgets for social care. More recently, they have moved in the direction that we urged them to follow, which included access to some aspects of health care as part of an overall personal budget. The point is that the budget is a cash budget, and there is an issue over how it should work.

On page 102 of the Green Paper, the Government say:

"We know that disability benefits such as Attendance Allowance are highly valued by the people who receive them, and that they give people control over how they spend their money to meet their care and support needs. However, we also recognise that there are inconsistencies of approach between disability benefits and social care within the current system. This is because the social care and disability benefits systems have developed in isolation from each other and these two largest portions of government care and support expenditure are being allocated on different bases. This can lead to inconsistent and unfair outcomes."

To me, the issue seems perfectly straightforward. If there are two sources of support for people and if one relates to social care and is means-tested while the other is based on an assessment of need, is not means-tested and is in cash form, and if there are inconsistencies between the two in relation to the assessment, what is the answer? The answer is to adopt a common process applying to both the assessment of need for the disability benefits and the assessment of need for access to social care. The answer is not to abolish the cash benefits and combine them in a single system. The Government have said—and it is in the amendment—that there should be a single assessment process; I hope they mean that, as we have agreed, there should be a common assessment process.

On 14 July, in response to the Secretary of State's announcement of a Green Paper, I said to him—I apologise for quoting myself—*[Interruption.]* It was right then, and it is right now. I said:

"I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will agree that we need national standards—some consistency of assessment. We have long argued for that, and of course there needs to be central Government support, but we do not need a nationalised social care service." *[Official Report*, 14 July 2009; Vol. 496, c. 160.*]*

That seems to me utterly consistent with the view—which the Government have apparently supported, in rhetoric—that there should be personalisation, that whenever possible there should be cash budgets over which people have more control, and that abolishing access to disability benefits would be a retrograde step.

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman has been making a powerful point about the advantage of cash benefits in giving individuals control. Does he accept that even if the Government concede that current recipients will continue to receive the cash, there will be a huge loss to future generations who will not receive it?

Mr. Lansley: I agree that it is important to have in mind the longer term, and to bear in mind those who may be recipients of benefit and care support in the future. However, I do not think the Government have said—and they do not say it in the amendment—that current recipients will receive the same cash support. They say they will

"receive an equivalent level of support."

Therefore, unless Ministers are willing to amend their amendment to the motion today, I am afraid that it simply does not answer this point.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend might care to know that the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) is a master of the lurid headline. His website reveals that he has issued press releases entitled:

"Docking alcoholics' benefits fundamentally inhumane"

and

"New benefits scheme shunting ill onto lower support",

as well as the astounding,

"Benefits changes will leave millions without social security".

Therefore, so as far as lurid titles are concerned, the hon. Gentleman obviously knows his stuff.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend makes a very good point better than I could have done.

Part of the argument on this matter is that attendance allowance is effective; it works. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said much the same thing last month to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions:

"One of the things we have said is that Attendance Allowance provides very important support for an awful lot of people across the country in a way that they hugely value. In particular it gives people control; it gives them control themselves over the way in which they get support and it is a budget that they can spend themselves."

The universities of Essex and Anglia Ruskin

"found no evidence that Attendance Allowance is paid long term to significant numbers of people who do not have accompanying health problems".

When someone receives both the allowance and care services, the allowance itself is taken into account through the financial assessment.

Those people who use this allowance often do so to save some money to meet higher occasional payments, such as for a wheelchair. An Age UK survey of older people who received attendance allowance found that the allowance supports older people

"to live in their own homes for as long as possible with a reasonable quality of life given their health...it would be no exaggeration to say that Attendance Allowance transforms people's lives."

In summary, people use the attendance allowance and disability living allowance to help them, under their own control, to create a quality of life for themselves that helps them to remain independent. That is precisely in line with the policy we are all trying to pursue. It is clear that if one narrowly focuses only on care needs, we will miss out much that goes to constitute well-being, and there is no health without well-being, and there is no independence, without sustaining people's quality of life.

The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and now that he has come to the core of his argument, I have to respond to him. His motion suggests that anybody in receipt of attendance allowance would receive no help from a national care service, and he is repeating that suggestion in the House, whereas in fact we are proposing to replicate the cash control in a new system so as to give people who would receive those benefits the same control and cash in the future. The central plank of the hon. Gentleman's argument is therefore knocked away, and I would be grateful if he would acknowledge that his motion's comments about no help for so many million benefit recipients are simply not true.

Mr. Lansley: I am sorry, but the Secretary of State is completely wrong about that. We are not asserting that people will get no help. We are asserting that existing recipients will not get access to cash benefits in the form in which they currently do, and they will therefore be able to exercise less choice and control because this will be routed through the national care service, which will have its own parameters and will not necessarily enable them to spend that money in the same form as they can now. Ministers have not said in their amendment that current recipients would get cash. Besides, the point is not just about current recipients; it is about future recipients and future reform. The last part of the motion

"urges the Government to ensure that attendance allowance and disability living allowance for people aged 65 years and over are secured and not abolished as part of any future reform of the social care system."

This therefore refers to "future reform."

Andy Burnham: I am grateful for that clarification, but let me read to the hon. Gentleman from his motion. It

"further notes with concern that approximately 2.87 million people in the UK who receive disability living allowance or attendance allowance are not eligible for social care services".

The crux of his argument is his scurrilous campaign to frighten those people and to suggest that they would receive no support under a national care service. He knows what he is doing—he is raising concern and, frankly, it is gutter politics.

Mr. Lansley: That is rather astonishing, is it not, Mr. Speaker? We have never said anything remotely like that. We always make it absolutely clear that we are opposed to the scrapping of attendance allowance and disability living allowance and their incorporation into the Government's proposed social care service. We want to give people access to cash benefits, personalisation and choice.

Roger Berry (Kingswood) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, who was among the initial signatories of the early-day motion.

Roger Berry: I hope that I can explain. The hon. Gentleman says that he said nothing like that. However, is it not the case that in your press release of 19 November, you vowed to

"fight against Gordon Brown's plan"

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that I have said nothing of the sort.

Roger Berry: I apologise, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Gentleman said, in his press release of 19 November, that he was leading a

"fight against Gordon Brown's plan to scrap benefits for the disabled."

Is it not disgraceful to suggest that anyone is planning to scrap benefits for disabled people?

Mr. Lansley: The Government's Green Paper is clearly intended to propose that disability benefits should be "scrapped", which is the word I used, in order to fund a national care service. That is something that the Government have proposed. I know and respect the hon. Gentleman, but he is trying to find a way not to vote for the early-day motion that he signed.

I have not come to ask the House to endorse my press releases. I have come to ask the House to settle this issue. If it is the Government's view—*[Interruption.]* No, I will not withdraw the motion. The Government should withdraw the amendment, which is clearly flawed, as they are saying that their policy is different from the amendment. If the Government believe that their policy would be consistent with our motion, they should vote for the motion. The debate is on our motion, not on something else.

Roger Berry: Does the hon. Gentleman seriously believe that proclaiming that the Government are planning to scrap disabled people's benefits is not causing enormous concern among the most vulnerable individuals and communities in our society? Should he not be ashamed of saying that?

Mr. Lansley: I am not ashamed. We are doing the job that the Government should have done, which is to get out there and explain to people what is in the Green Paper. What is shameful is publishing a Green Paper, at the heart of which is the major proposal of the abolition of cash benefits and their incorporation into funding a care service. The Government are happy to put out a proposal that states, "Would it be a good idea if the Government were to pay a quarter to a third of your care costs upfront?" and people say, "Yeah, that would be a good thing. That would be very nice, thank you." What the Government do not tell them is that, in the process, if they are in receipt of disability benefits, they will lose those benefits in order to pay for it. That is a completely different debate. Fortunately, we have organisations such as Age UK, Carers UK and the Parkinson's Disease Society who went out—we did not do it—and said, "Have you seen what is in the middle of this Green Paper?" They argued against it.

If the hon. Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) and the Secretary of State want to put a stop to this now, they simply have to vote for the motion. Then the House will have spoken. There are a range of issues, including the impact on the overall income of pensioners. Some 40 per cent. of all attendance allowance recipients would be living below the Department for Work and

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Pensions poverty threshold if their disability benefits were removed. As for taking away a cash benefit and providing a care service instead, Ministers talk about equivalent support but they do not talk about equivalent support for future recipients. If the benefits were to be taken away and replaced by the care service, there would be a serious potential impact on the disposable income of many pensioners. Those issues are not explored in the Green Paper. There is no economic modelling associated with the Green Paper and no understanding of what the overall impact on people's disposable incomes would be. There is no evidence about the relationship, in detail, between disability benefit recipients and those who would be the recipients of the national care service so that we can understand the implications for poverty and well being. I am afraid that that simply is not good enough.

The Government's response has been first to deny that they are going to do that, then to get angry and now to engage in abuse. It is like when someone cuts you up when you are driving and then swears at you; first, we get injury from the Government and then insults. It is no good Ministers blaming people's anxieties on us. The organisations that represent disabled people have been at least as voluble as we have been in making this point and in urging the Government to change their policy. We have been clear about the policy that we pursue, but we question whether the Government will be clear. Scrapping disability benefits to pay for the national care service would be a serious mistake and a retrograde step. It would undermine personalisation and control for care users, which they say they are in favour of, and it would undermine family and informal care as opposed to formal and council-arranged care. Members of the House who have followed the consultation on the Green Paper have the right to say no to that. Ministers should accept the motion and move on. That would not be such a big retreat after all the retreats that we have seen in recent months. I say to the Secretary of State, "Just do it. It will only be only painful for today, and tomorrow you will be in a better place as a result." I urge Members on both sides of the House to help the Government to get off this hook. I commend the motion to the House.

4.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham): I beg to move an amendment to leave out from 'House' to the end of the Question and add:

"welcomes the Government's proposals to create the National Care Service, the first national, universal, entitlement-based system for care and support in England; notes that the proposals will deliver real benefits to people including wider provision of prevention services, a single needs assessment across England and information, guidance and advice for all; recognises that in 20 years' time, 1.5 million more people will have care and support needs, whilst the number of people aged over 85 will have doubled; further notes that around 400,000 people will benefit from enactment of the Personal Care at Home Bill, which contains no proposed changes to disability benefits; acknowledges that the Government is considering responses to the Big Care Debate consultation before any decisions are made between a range of options for the National Care Service; understands that changes to disability living allowance for under-65s as part of the introduction of a National Care Service have been ruled out; and welcomes the reassurance that, if disability benefits for older people were to be reformed as part of the National Care Service, those receiving the affected benefits at the time of reform would continue to receive an equivalent level of support."

Let me begin by saying that I welcome the debate, which deals with a subject that matters greatly to many people in this country. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions should be thanked for securing the debate, but I cannot stand the simplistic, petty and partisan manner in which the hon. Gentleman introduced it. So far, the approach has been nothing more or less than crude electioneering. The nasty party—the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary knows all about that—is back in all its glory, and it is showing its unpleasant side in the Chamber this afternoon. The debate deserves a higher standard of comment than that which the hon. Gentleman has given today.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford) (Con): Given what the Secretary of State has just said in his preamble to his speech, will he explain why 41 of his hon. Friends have signed early-day motion 1?

Andy Burnham: I am going to come to that point. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman right now that this debate raises difficult questions. If one seriously intends to embark on a reform of social care in England, one cannot, as the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) rightly said, reduce it to simple press releases that are designed for electioneering, in the crude, simplistic and crass way that the Conservative party seeks to do. The debate deserves better than that and is more complicated than that, and we would expect a better level of engagement from Her Majesty's Opposition than they are offering.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I am listening to the right hon. Gentleman with interest, but I seem to remember that every time there is an election, we knock on pensioners' doors and they confront us saying, "The Labour party has told us that you're going to take away this benefit and that benefit." That is the Government's strategy in every election, so the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying that this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

Andy Burnham: Is that the best the hon. Lady can offer? This is crude electioneering. She has just owned up to it in the House. She has said, "That is what we are doing; you do it, so why can't we do it?" She has let the cat out of the bag.

Let me set out the important context to this debate.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andy Burnham: I shall give way in a moment.

Mr. Burns: Aah!

Andy Burnham: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

Let me set out the important context. Some 61 years ago, the House agreed to the establishment of the national health service to end the unfairness that the people with the greatest needs faced the highest costs and that the people who had the least were in danger of having their needs left unmet. Today, the same unfairness exists in social care. A person who happens to develop dementia in old age, rather than cancer or heart disease, is yet to find the freedom from fear that Nye Bevan promised as the goal of the NHS.

Mr. Chaytor: My right hon. Friend has brought us on to the very point that I was going to make. He referred to the difficult issues that the Green Paper raises. Is not one of them that so many elderly people on the standard level of attendance allowance cannot be persuaded to apply for the higher level, even though their needs would certainly make them eligible for it? Is not one of the other difficult issues that so many people with disabilities or incapacities of any kind do not get the care they currently need precisely because of the absence of a national care service? The analogy with the formation of the NHS is absolutely the right one.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend puts it very well. It is because the system has grown in a piecemeal way over the years that it has become confusing and in many ways a lottery. It varies very greatly around the country, according to the eligibility criteria operated by councils and a range of other things. That means that the system is a lottery, and the serious purpose that lies behind the Green Paper is to create a fairer care system for all, in which the people with the greatest needs have those needs met and society as a whole shares the risks and costs of providing that care. In creating such a system, we will provide a better standard and quality of care.

As I said, those who suffer the most face paying the most. It is an enduring unfairness that was not resolved in the post-war settlement, but it becomes more evident and urgent as people increasingly live longer. This House has failed to address the problem, but I do not believe that that can continue. In my view, all parties should commit to reforming social care in England in the next Parliament.

One in five people will need care that costs less than £1,000 during their retirement. One in five will need care that costs more than £50,000. In the worst cases, the sum can exceed £200,000. This cruel lottery leaves us with no way of predicting our risk and makes it hard to protect ourselves against it.

John Mason: The Secretary of State mentioned England for a second time just now. Does he accept that, if something happened to attendance allowances, that would also affect Scotland, Wales and, potentially, Northern Ireland? Has he decided how that would be dealt with?

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman will know that social care is devolved, but he is right to point out that any change to attendance allowance, which is a UK benefit, would have implications for Scotland. Of course we would work with colleagues in Scotland, and with the First Secretary, on making progress with any changes.

The current care system is piecemeal and complicated. Many do not know that care is means-tested. People face a battle to access the care that they need. When they succeed, the care can be of a poor quality, but not always. Resources are not channelled to where they are needed the most and, as we all know, carers often do not get the support that they need to make life tolerable and to enable them to provide the care and support that they want to to their loved ones, while also balancing other aspects of their life, such as work.

This much we know, and we know that the problem will become more pressing as the population gets older. When the NHS was created, there were eight working adults for every retired person. Today there are four, and by 2050 that figure will fall to just two. If the system is left unreformed, there are real questions about its sustainability in the long term.

I turn now to the Green Paper that we brought forward in July.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify the excellent work that carers do. Will he expand on exactly what the Government are doing to provide for carers, who in turn help elderly people to stay in their own homes?

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. In years to come, this will be as important as Sure Start is in helping young mothers with children to balance work and home. That is something that we have discussed in our debates about child care. We must give people looking after elderly relatives quality support that they can draw down when they need it, because that gives them the ability to work and to balance work with caring for their relatives. If we cannot provide that support, there will be an economic consequence for the country.

We have taken steps to support carers, and my Department has made funds available from our budget to support respite care. My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue. A crucial part of any national care service is to provide quality support for carers so that life becomes tolerable and they can carry on with their work and other responsibilities, knowing that there is good-quality support for their loved one when they are not with them. For all those reasons, we brought forward a Green Paper.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Quality is really important to elderly people, and it takes two forms. It relates both to care workers—their training and their capacity to understand people's care needs—and to when care is provided. Care should be given at times convenient for the person receiving it—when they want it rather than when it is convenient for the care agency. Are the Government eager to address and rectify that issue?

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend is quite right, and that is why direct payments and personal budgets will lie at the heart of any proposed national care service. We want that level of control at the heart of any reformed system. She is also right to raise the issue of quality. Although there are good examples around the country, and many councils are doing their best, the system is stretched and—if we are honest—it is not systematically providing quality to people across the country. Many people who work in social care earn at or close to the national minimum wage, so in some parts of the country it is difficult to recruit care staff to provide the services that are so desperately needed. For all those reasons, and to put quality at the heart of the work force, we need to pick up the work on strategy in social care being done by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Phil Hope), who has responsibility for care services. If we can do what we did successfully for the NHS work force, we shall develop a clear career structure, putting money behind training and development to ensure we have a high-quality, motivated work force. For all those reasons, the debate

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is important and complicated. It cannot be reduced to the level the Conservative party seeks—it is more complicated than that.

We have had a detailed debate on our Green Paper and the consultation has attracted a huge number of replies. Overwhelmingly, people support the principle that the system has to be reformed. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire did not say that, but it is what people are telling us. Of course there are difficult views about the nature and shape the reform should take, but people are agreed that worst of all would be to leave the system as it is, with more and more people's needs unmet as we go into a future with an ageing population.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend comment on the key role of qualified social workers in that scenario? They will have the important responsibility of assessing the needs of elderly people and vulnerable disabled adults before considering the care package that is needed. As he knows, social workers do an excellent job but, sadly, they do not get praise for their excellent work.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That point came out strongly last week when the social work taskforce reported its conclusions. It pointed out the need to raise the status of social work as a profession and talk up the changes it makes in helping people to live better lives and give them more opportunities. The point was also well made by my hon. Friend, and we have to work hard to make it a reality. Everything in our Green Paper depends on those professional voices in social work. Helping people to unlock the benefits of personalisation and steering them through the system is crucially dependent on a motivated social work profession in adult services. Young people today want to make a difference. One of the biggest differences they can make is to go into social work, be it for children or adults. On both sides of the House, we need to work hard to communicate that message very strongly indeed.

Our Green Paper set out a vision of a national care service that is fairer, simpler and more affordable, underpinned by national rights and entitlements and personalised to individual needs. It set out a system with quality at its heart, whereby people get the care and support that they need. People would know exactly what to expect, what they were entitled to and what they needed to do to get it. The national care service is about helping people to live their lives the way that they want to. It is about putting the person's needs and wishes first, and helping them to keep up relationships with family and friends, to live in their own home for as long as they can and, where possible, to continue to work and contribute to their community.

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is absolutely no inconsistency in the reform of social care service and the Government's priority of independence, choice and control for disabled people and older people?

Andy Burnham: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The two systems are coming together. With the introduction of direct payments, we have seen council support beginning to replicate the benefits system, and the two systems have been slowly merging. Reform would continue and deepen that process, placing individuals with the most need in control of their budget so that they can draw down the support and care that they need. My right hon. Friend is quite right to make that point.

Every citizen would stand to benefit under that new system. As well as helping people who need care, the national care service is about changing the lives of the friends and relations who support them. Many carers in this country have told us about the daily battle they face to get the support that they need, and we want to end that battle by providing a reliable, transparent and accessible system that makes it easier for them to manage their responsibilities. We intend to publish a White Paper in the new year, setting out our proposals for the future of care and support, based on the replies that we have received to our consultation.

I turn now to disability benefits. The current care and support system is provided through a combination of local and central Government funding, personal contributions and benefits. It is complicated, it is not clearly targeted at levels of greatest need and it is not sustainable. In each case, the amounts are increasing. Local government expenditure on adult social care has gone up by more than 50 per cent. since 1997; and the total fees paid by people who use the services have increased significantly over the same period. Today, there are more than 1.5 million recipients of attendance allowance, amounting to expenditure of more than £5 billion a year; and there are more than 790,000 disability living allowance recipients who are over 65 years old, totalling expenditure of some £4 billion a year.

By 2026, we can expect that 1.7 million more adults will need care and support than is the case today, and the cost of disability benefits for the elderly could rise by almost 50 per cent. in real terms. Demographic and financial pressures on that scale cannot easily be met within the current unreformed system, so we have to find a better way to provide support to older and disabled people, and there may be a case for bringing together some disability benefits within adult social care. That is the argument that we are putting forward.

The Opposition's motion refers to people who currently receive disability benefits but are not eligible for social care, and it is true that many people today do not get help from the state towards their care costs. However, that is precisely why this Government are showing leadership and looking at how we can best support care and reform services. As I said in my intervention, it is completely wrong to suggest that all those who currently receive disability benefits but do not receive support from social care services would lose out under a new system. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire made a big point of stating that he did not say that, but I am afraid that anybody who has picked up a Conservative party leaflet or a local newspaper recently will have been given a different impression from that which he has given the House this afternoon. He says one thing here and his party's parliamentary candidates say quite another in constituencies throughout the country. If he is serious about this debate, he must get his story straight now. He needs to say here—at that Dispatch Box—the same thing as his candidates say throughout the country. I am afraid that he has been found out today, and he was very helpfully smoked out by the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb).

Mrs. McGuire: Does the Secretary of State realise that it is not only the Opposition party's parliamentary candidates who are saying that? I shall quote another person, who says:

"And to top it off, unbelievably, they're cutting disability benefits for the oldest and most vulnerable members of our society."

That was the Leader of the Opposition, on "The Blue Blog", on 19 November.

Andy Burnham: I agree with my right hon. Friend: it is unbelievable. Conservative councils up and down the country are cutting day centres and nursing homes for older people—cutting social services budgets—and then the Conservatives make that kind of opportunistic statement that comes from a deliberate misreading of the situation in order to give fuel to their candidates in constituencies around the country. Whatever the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire says today, the reality is what my right hon. Friend has just read out, and it is now on the record for all to see.

It is completely wrong to say that people will lose out under a new system. This is not about using benefits to support the existing system. We want to create a new care and support system that goes beyond that and is fit for the 21st century. We accept that that means we need to carry people with this reform. We also need to protect people in the interim. We have therefore categorically ruled out using disability living allowance for the under-65s. No other decisions about benefit reform have yet been taken. However, we have been absolutely clear that if disability benefits are reformed as part of delivering the national care service, those currently receiving benefit will not lose out financially. To put it simply, there would be no cash losers from this reform. That will remain the case for life. Existing benefits recipients will keep the cash and keep the control—it could not be clearer.

People like disability benefits because they provide a universal entitlement, they provide a cash budget that can be spent on the services that people want, and they support lower-level needs that help people to stay well for longer. Those three principles will all be important features of the new care and support system that we seek to introduce.

Bob Russell: May I seek clarification from the Secretary of State? Is he referring to people currently over the age of 65 who are in receipt of benefit or those over the age of 65, who will in due course require benefits? Will they have those benefits secured as well?

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman is right—I am talking about existing benefit recipients. We are saying that, in future, we propose having a new system of support for people with care needs, but it is not correct to say that that means that support will be withdrawn, which is the argument that the Conservatives are advancing. Our whole aim in this reform is to give more help and support to the people who need it most. We believe that at the moment the money in the system is not properly targeted at those who need most support. That is the difference between our two positions.

Mr. Lansley: Will the Secretary of State clarify what he is saying? He seems to have changed the policy. The policy up to now, including in the Green Paper and as stated in the Government's amendment, has been:

"if disability benefits…were to be reformed as part of the National Care Service, those receiving the affected benefits at the time of reform would continue to receive an equivalent level of support."

He has just, in effect, replaced the words,

"an equivalent level of support",

with the words, "the same amount in cash"—that is, no cash loss. That is a completely different policy—which one is it?

Andy Burnham: I am sorry, but "equivalent level of support" is pretty plain—it means no cash losers. It is an equivalent level of support: that could not be clearer. I have said very clearly that people will keep the cash and keep the control. We have said that all along, but the hon. Gentleman has been choosing not to listen because it did not suit the grubby campaign that he has been mounting for the past couple of weeks. We have made this absolutely clear. He may not like it, because it does not suit his purposes, but it could not be clearer.

As I said, the three principles in the benefits system will all be important features of a new care and support system. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire will stop chuntering, let me say that cash payments will be at the heart of a new system. The care services Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby, and I have been saying that every day since we launched the Green Paper. That is what

"an equivalent level of support"

means. The hon. Gentleman has chosen not to listen to that because it was inconvenient—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the Secretary of State, but I must say to Ms Milton that there seems to be a competition among Front-Bench Members for the dubious accolade of chunterer-in-chief. *[Interruption.]* Order. I do not require any help from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns)—he is often competing for that accolade himself

Mr. Burns: Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: And we need no further intervention from him. I simply say to Front-Bench Members that they need to simmer down. It is good that there is a lively debate, but I want Back Benchers to be heard.

Andy Burnham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The point that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire seems to have missed is that we have said all along that cash payments will be part of the new system. I said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) a moment ago that in recent years, we have begun to see a merging of the local authority support system and benefits, with the introduction of direct payments. That is a trend that we want to continue. It is not about giving people's benefits to councils, as the press releases accuse us of. People in the care system are already getting used to getting cash budgets, and the number of people receiving them has risen by 28.9 per cent. over the past year. Including carers, 115,000 people have received them, and our reforms will take the process further. Let me be clear: we will reform disability benefits only if we are certain that the new system can better support the needs of older and disabled people.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire is often good at taking a big position without any reference to what other people in his party say. His whole thesis today was to raise the spectre of the loss of benefits, and he gave the idea that any reform of benefits means

[Andy Burnham]

somebody losing out and that we cannot possibly raise these issues without trying to cut support. However, I have before me a speech that the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) made in Scotland on Monday 16 October 2006. It was a long and, I may say, quite good speech about how to provide better support to disabled people in the long term. I shall come to the crux of it, because it is important that the House hears the right hon. Gentleman's peroration. He said:

"So there are the problems in the benefits system. It is too complex. It does not incentivise work sufficiently. And it relies too much on large government agencies…Our policy review is examining the option of a radical simplification of the benefits package for disabled people. I welcome the principle of Individual Budgets. But I'd like to go much further."

It is unbelievable—he was giving exactly the same argument that we have been mounting, which underpins our Green Paper. *[Interruption.]* Hear me out, there is more. He went on to back us up even further, saying:

"Instead of the half-dozen different benefits a disabled person can receive—each with its different conditions and its own application form"—*[Interruption.]*

They are not listening now, are they? He said that

"we should be moving towards a single assessment process, and perhaps even a single benefit."

There it is in black and white, in a speech, the same thing that we are talking about—the simplification of the support system, perhaps through a single benefit. Yet the Conservatives have brought the motion before the House today because, three years on from that, it suits their purposes to issue press releases and frighten disabled and older people up and down the country.

Mr. Lansley: I am still utterly unable to reconcile what the Secretary of State is now saying about the Government's change of policy with what is in the Green Paper. The use of disability benefits to pay for the national care service is intended to back what was clearly one of the preferred options, the partnership model. Page 109 of the Green Paper even has a helpful diagram showing how, under the current system, there is a big shift from people paying for themselves to people getting part of their care free. The Green Paper states that

"those who were on the lowest incomes would continue to get all their care for free."

Is he really telling us that under the national care service as he proposes to introduce it, existing disability benefit recipients will continue to get the exact cash benefit that they currently get, plus their social care free? In that case, where is the money to come from to provide universal care for others?

Andy Burnham: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me what part of "no cash losers" he does not understand? Interestingly, just as I was coming to a rather sensitive and difficult part of my speech for the Conservatives, he got up and raised a different point. He did not like hearing what I was saying, did he, but he was quick to come back with a red herring. The policy is "no cash losers" and it could not be more simple.

That brings me to the Personal Care at Home Bill. There are still huge challenges in the care and support system. The Green Paper sought people's views on how we resolve those and create a sustainable system for the long term. In our view, those with the greatest needs cannot wait, and we cannot stand still in meeting the challenge of rising costs. Currently, an estimated 80,000 older people in the highest need receive free personal care, but 40,000 pay part of their costs, and 50,000 pay all their costs.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Andy Burnham: No—I am making progress. Among younger adults, an estimated 90,000 receive free care, while 20 per cent. pay all or part of their own costs, so we want to start now with reform, by helping people to live independently for longer in their own homes for free, which is something they tell us they really want. Our Bill will do just that. It will end the postcode lottery in care for those most vulnerable members of our society. Let us not forget that many have already paid significantly out of their own pockets to fund their own care—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire says, "Second Reading on Monday." We are putting forward reforms that support people in their entirety—support for older and disabled people—and I am very sorry that he considers that unimportant.

Mrs. Moon: Does my right hon. Friend remember the scaremongering that took place when our party was introducing the Care Standards Act 2000? We were told that we would drive agencies and care home owners out of business, and that we would not raise standards or improve the quality of care. Some companies went out of business, but they could not provide quality care. The Bill is the next step in the reform of care that will improve life for the elderly and disabled. As such, should not everyone welcome it?

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend makes her point very well. The Conservatives have a track record on these issues—a track record of opposing any step forward that has given more dignity to older people, particularly those in residential or nursing care. I remember that on the day we launched the Green Paper in the House, a distinguished Member of the Opposition stood up to complain about the burden of the national minimum wage on care homes and asked whether more could be done to give more deregulation to care homes. Quite frankly, that is their true voice—that is what they have done in their past. When they come here with the pretence of speaking up for older people, I am afraid it just does not wash.

Mrs. May: As the Secretary of State has changed the Government's policy this afternoon, I think it would be helpful if the House could understand exactly what he is saying for those existing pensioner recipients of either attendance allowance or disability living allowance. Is he saying that under the Government's proposals, those people will no longer receive attendance allowance or DLA, but instead receive a cash payment? Is he also saying that, as with attendance allowance and DLA, they will be free to spend the payment on whatever they choose, or will they be able to spend it only on the provision of social care?

Andy Burnham: I do not think the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary has been listening this afternoon, nor do I think she listened yesterday at Work and Pensions questions, when the Under-Secretary of State

for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), said quite clearly that an equivalent level of support meant no cash losers. She has not been listening to this debate nor indeed did she listen to the debate yesterday.

The right hon. Lady asks if our proposals mean that people can have the control to buy what they need. How many times have I said that this afternoon? The crux of what we are building is the power and control that people get in cash benefits—that is at the heart of the national care service. It could not be clearer and she clearly has not been listening to anything we have said.

We want to go further. In the Personal Care at Home Bill, we want to build a system that does all it can not just to pick up the pieces when people need help, but that has prevention at its heart. We want to invest resources in re-ablement—services to get people back on their feet and to give them intensive support after illness, an operation or a fall, so that they can live independently at home. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire is only proposing to help people who end up in residential care. What kind of a vision of the future is that—giving people an incentive to go into residential care? Surely the best way forward for care is to invest in prevention, to give people support to live independently at home and, at all times, to support them to live in their home. That is what they tell us that they want.

Alistair Burt: Before the Secretary of State finally moves away from the clash of press releases, will he comment on the quote in the *Health Service Journal* today from a national health service source? Under the headline "NHS to take responsibility for social care", the report outlines the Government's plans to take more responsibility and states:

> "Social care is currently provided by local authorities, the majority of which are now Conservative controlled. A move towards greater control of social care by the NHS has been described to HSJ by an NHS source as one way to 'rip the guts out of' Tory-controlled councils."

Will he take the opportunity to condemn that quote and find the NHS source it came from?

Andy Burnham: Some 1.3 million people work in the NHS, and I cannot be responsible for what all of them say at all times. It is my judgment that, whatever happens, more money from the health budget will have to be spent closer to the line with social care. That is just the way things will have to go, and that is why I am talking about finding resources from within my Department to fund re-ablement services—intense support to get people back on their feet after a vulnerable or low moment in their lives. Because we do not provide such support at the moment, people end up at the door of the NHS or asking for support from local authorities. We want to expand the level of support. We should also be less precious about spending health resources on equipment and telecare to help people to live in their own homes. That is all part of my vision. We have to break down the approach of the past that has said, "The health service pays for this and councils pay for that", and we argue about the bit in the middle. We can no longer sustain that—the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) is nodding in agreement. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire should listen to more distinguished voices on his Back Benches if he wants some good advice about policy. The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire has a long track record in these areas.

This is an ambitious vision and it will not happen overnight. It raises complex and difficult questions that this House needs to consider carefully before proceeding with any reform. It cannot be a debate that is reduced to crude electioneering, because that would block out and shout down the debate. That is what we have heard from the Conservatives this afternoon. We have raised the issue of social care and the response from them is to shout it down and frighten people. The Conservatives cannot open up the debate because they do not have the ideas to put into the debate. Let us have a few more ideas and constructive comments, rather than the low politics that we have heard from them this afternoon.

The Prime Minister has committed to making social care our top domestic priority in the next Parliament. That shows that we have the ideas, the courage and the confidence to tackle the big issues that the country faces. I believe that the national care service could be a major social reform that will stand alongside some of the major reforms of the last century. It would be easy to say that it is too difficult. We have been under pressure this afternoon to say that we will drop it all, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire invited me to do at the end of his comments. But we will not do that: we will see this through. If we fail to act, we will make the choices more difficult, the unfairnesses will grow year on year and this post-war generation—it includes people who own their own properties and who will live longer, which is a good thing—will face ever more unfairness than their parents did. These are big challenges. The Government believe that we have the right ideas to address them, and I urge my hon. Friend to oppose the motion.

4.45 pm

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): As we have heard, we are effectively debating early-day motion 1, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) after a night spent in a sleeping bag to ensure that he was in the Table Office to table perhaps slightly more than one early-day motion. However, of all the issues that could be brought to the House's attention, he chose this to be the first motion of the new Session, and rightly so. I congratulate him.

The subject of our debate is important, and I am delighted that the Conservatives have put the words in my hon. Friend's motion on the Order Paper. He was quite surprised when I told him last night that they had done so—he was slightly surprised too that they did not tell him directly, but never mind. However, the debate gives us the chance to put to rest, I hope, something that has caused great anxiety among millions of disabled people in Britain.

We have all seen the press release being talked about, and as much as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) might pretend otherwise, it is transparent that the release that he is encouraging his party's candidates to put out is designed to alarm current recipients of the allowances. All the statistics that his office—I assume that it is his office—has inserted into the press release

[Steve Webb]

relate to current recipients. It refers to 2.4 million pensioners who are current recipients. It reads: "In *(constituency),*"—fill in the gap—"this would affect *(x)* pensioners *(y)* who receive Attendance Allowance"—note the present tense—"and *(z)* who receive Disability Living Allowance". It is designed to frighten people.

John Mason: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Webb: In a moment.

I hope that the Department will reflect on whether its language in the Green Paper should have been more unambiguous and should not have left the door open to such campaigning. It is helpful that the Secretary of State said clearly this afternoon that there would be no cash losers; that was not the phrase used in the Green Paper. For the avoidance of doubt, and for those 2.4 million people, I shall describe, as faithfully and as accurately as I can, on the strength of the conversations that we have had, what I understand the Government's policy to be. If I get anything wrong, I hope that Ministers will correct me.

John Mason: The hon. Gentleman has made the exact point that I was going to put to him. The Government have said that people will be guaranteed an equivalent level of support, but that could mean anything. We assumed, as did many vulnerable people, that it meant that people's disability benefits were under threat. Does he agree that the Government themselves have been the main cause of the problem?

Steve Webb: As I said, I think, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, that the wording in the Green paper could have been more unambiguous. The draft press release states:

"Conservatives will protect *(area's)* pensioners and fight against Gordon Brown's plan to scrap benefits for the disabled."

That rather extends what the Green Paper might have been thought to mean. For the record, however, I shall describe what I think the Government are saying. Under the proposals, existing recipients over pension age of disability benefits—attendance allowance and DLA—will continue to get, first, the same amount of cash; secondly, they will be as free as they are now to spend it on what they like; and, thirdly, if, in addition to those cash benefits, they receive social care from a local authority, that will continue as well. Those are the three strands that I understand are present from what Ministers have said.

Jonathan Shaw *indicated assent.*

Andy Burnham *indicated assent.*

Steve Webb: That is helpful.

The proposals therefore raise questions for future recipients—that is what I am now talking about—and I hope that Ministers will address some of those questions. For example, if DLA is to remain for under-65s but perhaps not for over-65s, there will be a question about the transition from under to over 65. It is clear from research evidence that DLA is not just a care cost benefit, but a disability cost benefit. Is it not therefore the case that, in the future, if people on DLA who became disabled before pension age go on to the new regime and receive support from a different package—I do not want to say "have it taken away from them"—that will presumably give them potentially less cash after the transition to spend on the other costs associated with their disability? I assume that that would be a consequence of the Government's proposal. Is there not a danger, therefore, that although those individuals' care needs might be fully met in the future, the compensation that society has given over generations for the additional costs of disability would thereby be undermined, because potentially all or a large part of that cash would be put into a bucket for care costs and their ability to meet other, extra disability costs might thereby be constrained? We need to understand the transition from under to over the pension age, compared with the position now. That is the first question that I hope the Minister responding will address.

The second question is about the current role of such benefits in passporting people on to other things. If a person receives attendance allowance, someone will be looking after them 35 hours a week and, in principle, will be passported on to carer's allowance. Could the Minister who responds to the debate say something about how such passporting might work in a world where new recipients receive a care package, but do not necessarily receive the benefits that passport them on to other benefits? One imagines that there are ways around that, but there would be consequences.

We all agree on the importance of cash benefits for personal control, personalisation and dignity. We would all want the cash to make our own choices and not to have the state decide what pattern of services we want. One of my concerns about the Government's proposal is that the new system will inevitably rely more heavily on means-testing than the current one. That is implicit in the Green Paper, which on page 102 describes attendance allowance thus:

"Attendance Allowance is not means-tested, so people get it regardless of how well-off they are."

Of course, that is simply a statement of fact, but why does the Green Paper say that and, by implication, "And this might be thought to be a bad thing. This is not money well spent"? At that point we part company with the Government, because our argument is that attendance allowance and DLA are designed to meet the additional costs of disability and people have those additional costs whether they are rich or poor.

We are talking about a universal benefit for people with disabilities. They will all face a set of additional costs on average, so we as a society compensate them all. Reading between the lines of the Green Paper and suggesting that, although there are additional costs, people who are well off can meet them themselves would be a worrying undermining of that principle. In our view, therefore, a continuing role for a disability benefit that is specifically related to the additional costs of care, but separate from the process for assessment and meeting care needs, is an important part of the system.

I admit that I was rather puzzled by what the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said about a single assessment system; his comment struck me as rather odd. At the moment, we have a system in which attendance allowance goes to millions of people who do not get social care services provided by their local authority. In a single assessment system, however, there are only two

possible outcomes. Either the outcome is as broad as attendance allowance, in which case we would bring all the people who get social care who do not currently receive the allowance into the system, which would presumably be hugely expensive; or it is as narrow as social care, in which case people would be knocked out of attendance allowance. If neither of those two things is done, the system is not a single system.

I suppose we could have a compromise, whereby a few fewer people receive attendance allowance and a few more people receive social care, but that is not what the hon. Gentleman seemed to be saying. I am therefore slightly confused. We have come not to expect alternative proposals from the Conservative Opposition, but this time there is one on the table, only it seems not to make any sense. If we are talking about a single process of assessment that is different from what we have now, either it is universal and based on need, like attendance allowance, or it is means-tested, like social care, but it is rather hard to see how those can be one, single system.

There is an important question about what I call the non-overlap group—the people who are disabled enough to receive attendance allowance, but who do not get local authority social care. Again, my concern is that either that set of people loses out if attendance allowance goes, or the Government do not save any money, because those people use their attendance allowance to pay for care, and if the allowance was not there, they would rely on local authority provision. The only saving would be achieved be through means-testing, which is a worry. We all know why means-testing happens—we cannot be generous to everyone, so we pick some people—but there is a balance to be struck between universalism and means-testing.

One of my worries about the present Government is that the balance between universal and means-tested benefits in, for example, the pensions system has gone very much in the direction of means-testing. We have on the Front Bench today a former Pensions Minister, who will know that, when there was spare cash, it went into the means-tested areas. That was an understandable choice, but the Minister says that social care needs to look more like the NHS, and one of the hallmarks of the NHS is that we as a society say that people who are sick are entitled to help whether they are rich or poor. In my view, the Government's model seems to be veering in the direction of means-testing, because if we roll attendance allowance into the local authority social care budgets, we will by definition be doing more means-testing. We all get letters from our constituents saying, "I've worked hard and saved hard, but what was the point, because I'm no better off?" If we make social care more means-tested, we will rightly get more of those letters, because needing social care is akin to needing health care; it is the same sort of thing. Our worry about the direction of Government policy is the greater emphasis on means-testing.

That brings us to take-up. We know that take-up, even of the universal disability benefits, is not brilliant. There are plenty of people out there who should be getting attendance allowance or disability living allowance but who are not doing so. If we were to impose a means-testing regime on all that to create a single system, the likelihood of people missing out on the whole lot would increase. In Work and Pensions questions yesterday, a question was asked about the length of the DLA form. The Minister quite properly said that it was a complicated business and that we have to ask a lot of questions if we want to capture everything. If we tried to combine that with a means-tested system of local authority care, I imagine that the barriers would be even greater and we would therefore risk excluding vulnerable people. Having a mixture of the universal system that includes attendance allowance and, ideally, a less means-tested local authority system would create a better balance than what the Government are proposing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester was right to table his early-day motion a few weeks ago. The motion before the House today accurately sets out our position, which is that attendance allowance and DLA for the over-65s have an important part to play in the system. We recognise that the Government have promised equivalent cash support for current recipients, but we believe that those benefits have a long-term future as well. That is where we part company with the Government.

Bob Russell: Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite the differences of opinion between Government and Opposition Front Benchers, the fact is that 105 hon. Members from all eight political parties represented in the House, plus independents, have signed the early-day motion? There is no reason why the 39 Labour Members who signed it should not sign up to the motion before the House today, especially as they outnumber the 21 Conservatives and 32 Liberal Democrats. There is no reason why the House should not be united on the motion.

Steve Webb: I share my hon. Friend's hope, but I am slightly torn. We are always glad when Members from other parties sign our early-day motions, and the last thing we want is to discourage them from doing so in the future. I take my hon. Friend's point that there is nothing in the motion with which they should have a problem. I was not planning to make a partisan point, but this reminds me that, as of yesterday, when I realised what motion had been tabled for today, I checked to see how many Conservative Members had signed the early-day motion. At that stage, the number was 16. Given the primary importance of the subject, I was rather startled to find that the early-day motion had been signed by only 16 of them—including the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who presumably knew that this debate was coming. That was rather a surprise. I agree with my hon. Friend, however, that there is nothing in the motion that Labour Members should have any difficulty with.

The key points are that we, corporately—to put it generously—should cease as of now to cause alarm to 2.4 million disabled people, and that the message goes out that their benefits and their rights are protected and will remain intact. By all means, let us have a mature debate about the future, but in our judgment, attendance allowance and DLA will continue to have a specific role to play in the system, by meeting the additional costs that those of us who are fortunate enough not to be disabled do not have. Those costs are incurred regardless of means and those benefits should therefore have a long-term role in the system. Any attempt to make the system more means-tested discourages those who have worked hard and saved hard, and penalises those who have become disabled through no fault of their own. That is the wrong direction to go in.

[Steve Webb]

I hope that this debate will be helpful in placing on the record the reasons why current recipients need not be alarmed, while also allowing us to encourage the Government to think again about the threats to those benefits whose purpose is to meet additional costs that are not met elsewhere in the system and should always be met in any future system.

5 pm

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): I hope not to take up my full allocation of time. I have one or two points to raise, not least because I used to be the Minister with responsibility for disabled people and had to deal with some of the early policy issues and discussions about this development.

Perhaps we should be more optimistic about why we are all here today. The justification for the reform of social care is, as the Secretary of State indicated, that we are all living longer and, thanks to medical science, can be kept in our homes longer. That is the good news to start with. The bad news is that although the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who opened for the Conservative Opposition, said that there was a need for consensus, he then went on to scaremonger about the so-called attempt by a Labour Government to take away disability benefits from nearly 3 million people in Britain. Frankly, that is a disgraceful way to come at the subject, because the reform of social care is an important matter for all of us.

As the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) suggested, we should have a mature debate. *[Interruption.]* In some ways—I point this out to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), who is the current Minister with responsibility for disabled people—our approach to pension reform should provide a model. That was about consensus and moving forward on the basis of certain principles. Frankly, however—*[Interruption.]* I think some Opposition Members should take a degree in chuntering, because they are getting very good at it.

I will not take lessons from an Opposition who, in October this year, said that their solution to social care reform was a one-off payment of £8,000, which would give people no guarantee that they would not have to pay a top-up if their social care costs were more than approximately £26,000. There were no guarantees either to people with a pre-existing health condition that their social care costs would be covered. I declare a vested interest: I wonder whether insulin-dependent diabetics who may have complicated health needs will get the benefits that they require if they pay that £8,000. The Conservative proposal was taken apart by every expert in the field because it was drawn up on the back of an envelope to please a Conservative party conference. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health clarified that there was absolutely no contradiction between the reform of social care and independence, choice and control for disabled and elderly people.

John Mason: I am listening to what the right hon. Lady is saying, but does she accept that the words "equivalent level of support" were, with hindsight, a little unfortunate?

Mrs. McGuire: I think that the Secretary of State has answered that question—today and previously—and we are now in the territory of working out how many semantic angels can dance on the head of a pin. The Secretary of State and the Government have been very clear throughout that there will be no cash changes for individuals.

To colleagues who are having difficulty dealing with the reform of social care or in engaging with a Green Paper consultation, let me explain that there is no independence for an elderly person living on attendance allowance in a local authority that does not see social care as one of its funding priorities. That is not about independence, it does not provide choice and it certainly does not give control. As for my friends in voluntary organisations such as Carers UK and the many others that have been mentioned, I have the utmost respect for them, but I think they know in their heart of hearts that we must have a genuine discussion about how to deal with the demographic time-bomb and the social care time-bomb that we all face. I understand exactly why they are advancing some of the arguments that we have heard today, but they need to become part of the ongoing discussion about how we can reform the system. Even the best of the voluntary organisations need to respond to the conundrum of how we should deal with a social care system in which two people are working for every one person over the age of 65.

Mr. Burns *rose—*

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con) *rose—*

Mrs. McGuire: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Burns: Which one?

Mrs. McGuire: The handsome one at the front.

Mr. O'Brien: I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady. She began by rightly championing the idea of consensus, suggesting that it would be helpful and that the pension process might prove to be a precedent in that regard. Does she accept, however, that although we in the official Opposition have always indicated that we would be receptive, we have never received an invitation even to discuss the issue, let alone an invitation to a round table with Ministers?

Mrs. McGuire: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should reflect on whether the Opposition have made any effort to contribute to the consultation over the past few weeks. *[Interruption.]* Is the hon. Gentleman saying that they made a formal response to the formal response to the consultation document? I am not sure whether the answer is yes or no.

Mr. Burns: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. McGuire: Very briefly. I did say that I would not take up all my allotted time.

Mr. Burns: Will the right hon. Lady briefly answer a very specific question? Why, in her view, did 41 of her colleagues sign the early-day motion which became the motion before the House today?

Mrs. McGuire: I think that colleagues sign early-day motions for all sorts of reasons and I do not wish to second-guess the motives of any of my colleagues. The purpose of signing early-day motions is to put on the agenda matters about which Members feel strongly. I do not intend to fall into any trap set by the hon. Gentleman.

As I have said, I believe that genuine discussions must take place with the organisations that represent the needs and ambitions of disabled people. Let me say this to the Government, and I say it with the utmost respect to my colleagues. I welcomed the Secretary of State's comments about cash support, but the Government know that disability benefits, including attendance allowance, are valued and that any proposed changes should be seen in the context of improving the lives of disabled and older people in the future—I recognise that we are talking about the future.

Unusually, I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason). Obviously, any discussions must take account of the impact in other parts of the United Kingdom. We must recognise that devolved Administrations will be involved if changes are made to what is currently a United Kingdom-wide benefit. The discussions must be meaningful and robust, and I hope that some of them have already begun.

This is probably the next great social agenda development, and I do not think any of us can run away from it. We cannot change the demography, certainly in the short term. The social care Green Paper sets out the questions, highlights some of the options, and gives people an opportunity to engage in the debate. What we cannot do is run away from that debate. We cannot simply pretend that it is not happening, or we shall have abrogated our responsibility to future generations whose social care needs will have to be met.

5.9 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) on saying that she would sit down well within her allotted time, and then sticking to her promise. I shall try to emulate her in that regard.

The right hon. Lady began by saying that the occasion for the debate was good news—the news that more elderly people are living longer—and that we should all celebrate that good news. I entirely agree with her, but the other aspect of the background to the debate is less happy. Although it has been recognised from 1997 onwards, and indeed was recognised by the previous Government—in which, as Secretary of State for Health, I was responsible for these issues—the fact that people are living longer, and have higher expectations for their care in old age, creates a real policy challenge when it comes to paying for the care that, when we are younger, we all want for elderly people and that we want for ourselves as we grow older. The current Government came to office, and the then Prime Minister promised action on this subject, in autumn 1997, yet all we have had are repeated commissions that have, in truth, failed to address the issue.

The most accurate assessment of the issue was provided by the Wanless report, which said that merely to stand still—merely to deliver the same quality of care to elderly people as now—would require the proportion of gross domestic product committed to this area of care to rise from 1.1 per cent. to 1.5 per cent. over the next 15 years, and that that would represent an increase in the cash cost of providing that care of £14 billion. That is how much it would cost merely to stand still. A parallel report by the Commission for Social Care Inspection pointed out that to stand still is not to deliver on our aspirations. The background to our debate is, therefore the fact that for 12 years we have failed to address the question of how we as a society will fund our aspirations for elderly care.

Twelve years on, the Government produced a Green Paper this summer, which is the immediate background to the debate, because it tabled the suggestion that attendance allowance and disability living allowance should be put into the pot to square the circle of paying for this area of care. It also tabled the suggestion that "a National Care Service"—capital N, C and S—should be developed, but it set out almost no details of what such a service should look like, beyond saying that disablement benefits should be part of the funding solution for paying for reshaped care for elderly people.

Since that Green Paper was published, two fundamental conflicts have developed at the heart of policy in this area. They have now started to bubble to the surface, and I want to address those two conflicts this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) has already discussed the first of them: should we develop a policy that is based on a preference for the payment of cash benefits, or one that allows greater flexibility for commissioners of service to provide a package of care that is, in their opinion, tailored to meet the needs of elderly people, but that does not necessarily reflect the wishes of the elderly people themselves?

John Mason: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that option could turn out to be more expensive as well? Often, a friend or family member will visit to care for a few hours and they will incur only the cost of the taxi fare, but if such visits were replaced by the local authority providing paid care for a few hours, that would be much more expensive.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and what he says is relevant to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire about the way in which a local authority-commissioned service relates to carers. A local authority-commissioned service runs the risk of being less accurate in meeting what elderly people want and demand of such services, and therefore of being not merely more expensive, but less good value for money. There are therefore many reasons for choosing to have a policy that prefers, accentuates and develops direct payments, rather than officially commissioned services. That is why we passed the direct payments legislation before 1997, and it is why we have supported the development of that concept since. I believe that any move to put disablement benefits into the pot to pay for the national care service would be a big step in the wrong direction.

The Ministers say, "Don't worry about it. Local authorities will still have the same encouragement to pay direct cash payments." Who do they think they are kidding? They are clearly not kidding the next generation of elderly people. I accept entirely that there will be no

[Mr. Dorrell]

cash losers in the current generation of benefit recipients, but we are concerned here about the development of policy for the future. I simply do not believe that if we take a system that provides an entitlement to a cash benefit and give that cash to a local authority commissioning body, we will have entrenched or developed the policy of preferring cash payments to commissioned services. It flies in the face of common sense, and particularly so when we all know that we are going into a decade in which there will be severe resource pressure.

Of course, it is true that, against that background—even if the Department of Health does not prefer such an approach—the Treasury is encouraging this policy direction to create more flexibility to free up resources that, in its mind, are now being devoted to a demand-led programme so that it can put those resources at the disposal of a priority-led programme that will be subject to a cash limit in the way that the disablement benefit programme is not. All those reasons should, I believe, commit us to opposing a development of policy that takes an existing demand-led cash payments programme and puts it into a local authority cash-limited priority-led programme. That simply will not deliver the core policy objective that has been consistently developed since before 1997 and, to give them credit, by this Government since 1997 to build up a preference for cash payments over commissioned services. That is one fundamental conflict that I believe to be at the heart of the development of the policy for a national care service.

The other conflict that is equally at the heart of this policy has not yet been raised this afternoon. It is the unresolved conflict caused by the question of whether we are seeking to develop greater local flexibility, local choice and local management of these services or a single national blueprint, rolled out across the country. The Department of Health talks about putting the disablement benefits at the disposal of the national care service in order to fund and develop its vision of a national care service with national assessment, a national entitlement programme and the development, therefore, of a policy that moves social care for the elderly from being a local authority service to a national service on the model of the national health service. The Secretary of State made it entirely explicit that that was the agenda of the Department of Health.

At the same time, in this Chamber, only a few weeks ago, we were debating with the Department for Communities and Local Government the development of the Total Place programme, which embraces the idea that disablement allowances should be put into that programme in order to take funds that are currently determined by a national programme with a national entitlement prescription and to put them at the discretion of local authorities so that they can create a more flexible local model of service delivery that reflects more accurately the local circumstances of individual local authorities.

Which approach are the Government supporting? Are we putting attendance allowances and disablement allowances into the local pot in order to develop a national care service? There is something tautological about taking a national programme and putting it into local authorities in order to develop a national care service. That is a bit like listening to a Frenchman explaining the game of cricket. Are we developing the programme in order to develop a national care service or are we taking these benefits and putting them at the discretion of the local authority in order to develop local flexibility and Total Place? Again, this comes back to a point that I made earlier. Is this about putting those moneys into a cash-limited programme to create greater discretion, as would be the Treasury's agenda, or is it about the national payment of cash benefits according to a national entitlement programme, which would be my preference?

My central point is that, against the background of the Government having failed for 12 years to address the resource challenges in the care of the elderly, they published a Green Paper this summer that said that the solution was the development of a national care service—three words with no policy behind them. That was a good headline, but behind it is an unresolved muddle of unresolved conflicts. All that is unresolved after 12 years of failing to rise to the challenge that was clearly there 12 years ago. Hon. Members need not take my word for that: in 1997, Tony Blair said that it would be a disgrace if this matter were not addressed. Those were his words, not mine.

5.21 pm

Roger Berry (Kingswood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who has raised two fundamental issues. I hope that the Government and others, in their response to the consultation exercise, will consider those issues carefully.

I start from the position of being one of those who signed the early-day motion—and not just yesterday—but I shall be supporting the Government amendment this evening.

Mr. Burns: Surprise, surprise!

Roger Berry: The hon. Gentleman may say that, but I have voted against the Government on rare occasions when I felt that there was no alternative and I have not precluded entirely the possibility of my ever doing that again, but I hope that I do not have to. We have had a consultation exercise and the Government's amendment makes it clear that they are considering the responses to that consultation. It is quite wrong for members of the Opposition to say that the Government have decided to stop disability benefits. That is untrue and misleading, and it scares vulnerable people. That is another reason why I shall not vote for the Opposition's motion. We have heard some of the responses to the consultation, and most of us can guess what many of the responses from various organisations have been. Those responses should be treated seriously, and I am sure that they will be, but no decisions have yet been made.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman has been around this course several times. He knows this subject exceptionally well and he has a strong reputation in the House on this issue, so is he puzzled that, in dealing with some of the earlier responses to the consultation, the Minister and others have left hanging much of what has raised concerns outside? It appears that attempts are being made to deal with part of that today. If they had been as clear as he suggests, there would not have been the scares that currently involve certain organisations. Could Ministers have not done rather better?

Roger Berry: I can answer that in one sentence. People are anxious because others have generated scares outside. Let me speak for myself. I agree with the Government that disability benefits should be seen in the context of a national care service. I, as much as anyone, want a national care service that is similar to the national health service. That is long overdue. As the Government say in their amendment, the national care service is about having a

"national, universal, entitlement-based system for care and support".

The only part of the system that is currently national, universal and entitlement-based is the benefit system—attendance allowance, disability living allowance and other related benefits. My point of departure is this: if our purpose is to create a national care service, I find it strange that the part of the package that we should start considering is the one part of the service that is national, universal and entitlement-based. It would be much more logical, in summary, for attendance allowance, DLA and related national entitlements to be the basis on which we build a national care service.

I welcome the publication of the Green Paper. It addresses a number of the shortcomings of the social care system that deny disabled and older people the right to decent care and support. That is why virtually every disability organisation—Age UK, Age Concern, Help the Aged and many others—has also welcomed it.

It is interesting that, within a few days, the same organisations expressed specific concerns about the future of disability benefits, so I think that we should regard their submissions as pretty sophisticated: they passionately want a national care system, but they have concerns about removing the national entitlements that currently exist through the benefits system.

We all know why things need to be done. As Members of Parliament, we all know that needs are being met insufficiently. Our constituents frequently have unmet needs, and perhaps the same is true for members of our families. At present, local authorities are addressing only the most serious needs, and there are charges. For instance, a constituent wrote to me this week claiming that her charging regime was unfair and unreasonable, and I think that she is correct. In addition, the 6 million carers in our country do not get the kind of support that they should get, and all that is despite the fact that the Government are putting more money than ever into the social care system. I do not think that the Government can be criticised for not providing extra resources. They have done that, but the system itself is not functioning as it should.

As the right hon. Member for Charnwood said, provision varies from local authority to local authority. People who get an assessment for care and support in one local authority but who have the temerity to want to work, or visit relatives, in the next-door local authority have to go through the process all over again. When will that cease? Entitlements are not portable. When are we going to get portable entitlements? A national care system, if it is national, will at least address that problem.

Finally, disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people. In such circumstances, therefore, we should be very cautious indeed about considering changes to benefits in a downward direction. Let us not forget that people who receive attendance allowance and DLA are, sadly, some of the poorest in our society.

As I have said, I support the vision of a national care system and national entitlements. I welcome the emphasis in the Green Paper on preventive interventions and on promoting choice and control. As other hon. Members have said, it is the national entitlements that give choice and control at the moment, because people can choose how to spend that money.

I think that resources could be saved if we moved to a national care system, and away from multiple assessments of non-portable entitlements between local authorities. The existing bureaucracy could be reduced in size, and some resources could be saved that should be spent on front-line care and support. Nevertheless, we all know that that is not going to be enough to provide the resources that the social care system needs at present. It will certainly not be enough, given the well-known demographic changes, to ensure the resources that the social care system of the future will need, but I repeat that I do not think that it makes sense to fund the social care system by undermining that part of the benefits system that works most successfully at present.

As the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) has pointed out, many people who receive attendance allowance do not receive any social care support at all. Why should we consider any change to that entitlement, given the possible consequences for those people?

It must also be stated that, as we all know, many people's experiences of local authority social services are not good. I am a former local councillor and I am passionate about local government, but we all know that there are local authorities, for faults that either are not their own—perhaps insufficient resources—or are their own that do not provide the quality service that is needed. When disabled people say to me, "For goodness sake, we must retain AA and DLA", it is often because they cannot bear the possibility that the money would somehow end up under the control of local authorities with their current management of the social care system.

That is not a criticism of individuals who work for local authorities. Many struggle in very difficult circumstances indeed. Many local authorities are quite small, so there is often a real question about how they can provide a comprehensive social care service. I am not criticising individuals—I am simply relaying what we all know: many of our constituents who use local authority social care services are less than enthusiastic about their quality and are, therefore, all the more keen to hang on to national entitlements via the benefits system.

Attendance allowance and DLA are paid directly to individuals regardless of their personal circumstances, such as where they live, which makes the allowances an obviously desirable entitlement. As we have all said, recipients can spend the money as they wish. Those allowances have all the advantages of the individual budget—they are about empowerment, choice and control. The allowances have the important characteristics that we are saying the national care system should have in the future, so we should tamper with them only after we have come up with a very good reason for so doing. At the moment, it does not make much sense to move the part of the system that arguably works most successfully, given what disabled and older people expect from it, and that is why disability organisations, Age Concern and Help the Aged have expressed concerns.

[Roger Berry]

Disability Alliance and the disability consortium—representing between 25 and 30 organisations—oppose the use of existing benefits to fund social care. Disability Alliance said:

"DLA and AA were intended to help with the higher costs of living disabled people and their families experience, and to help tackle the link between disability and poverty. We believe placing either or both of these funds in the pool for Local Authority distribution could cut support and restrict choice and control for many disabled people."

We should listen to what Disability Allowance has to say.

Age Concern and Help the Aged said:

"If the idea to stop AA is taken forward, it will mean that many older people will be worse off than they are now."

We should take that seriously—*[Interruption.]* Despite the provocation from those on the Opposition Front Bench, we should still take that comment extremely seriously indeed.

Finally, we all recognise that the Institute for Social and Economic Research is an organisation that has no political agenda; it produces reports and analyses by experts in the field. Its response was:

"Since the need for 'care'...is the main criterion governing eligibility for the benefits, it is sometimes assumed that the money is intended to pay for care. On the other hand, the past governments that introduced these benefits made it clear they were intended to contribute to the general extra cost of living faced over the long haul by disabled people and their families—extra heating, special diets, the incidental costs of hospital visits and so on—not necessarily on caring services."

Others have made that point this afternoon. The ISER continued:

"Standard of living indicators suggest that the current benefits do little more than compensate disabled people and their families for the extra costs associated with disability. A reduction in their cash incomes is likely to lead to an increase in deprivation."

The significant additional resources needed for the national care system should come from general taxation. I do not believe that one group of disabled people should be required to pay disproportionately for care and support for another group of disabled people. It is a responsibility that all citizens should share. My concerns, therefore, are that we might end up damaging the most successful part of the current system, which is the national entitlements via the benefit system, and that the proposal may not be fair.

The truth is that we will not know the detail that might be in the White Paper until we see the White Paper. Indeed, a number of questions have been raised, not least by the right hon. Member for Charnwood, to which I suspect we will not get clear answers this afternoon, and I hope that that is for a good reason. I hope that it is because the Government are considering carefully the submissions that were made to the Green Paper as part of the consultation exercise.

Yes, I signed early-day motion 1, and I did so for the simple reason that I agree with it. However, I am afraid that I shall not support the Opposition motion before us, and I shall not do so for two reasons. Sixteen Opposition Members signed the motion, and a number of them did so yesterday. I have great respect for the views of many Opposition Members, and I make no personal comments, but it is not good enough for a political party to use the early-day motion as a bandwagon on which to jump and bash others when three handfuls of its Members actually put their names to the relevant motion. When they also go around making statements, as they have explicitly done, saying that the Government are taking away disability benefits, despite no such decisions having been made, I think that that is outrageous. That was not in the statement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who was here earlier this afternoon, and I have it in front of me.

So, I shall not support an Opposition motion that has been presented in that way. The Government's amendment explicitly states that no decisions have been made, and I welcome that. It states also that they will take into account the consultation exercise and the submissions that have been made. The Government are not setting out to frighten people, and for that reason I shall support their amendment. That is no guarantee, however, that they can always rely—on every conceivable occasion—on such unqualified support.

5.37 pm

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): These are always good debates in which to take part, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry), who knows and cares about this subject very deeply. I agreed with many of his later remarks, but I shall avoid the difficulties of the politics for a while. It is always, however, a pleasure to listen to him, as it is to listen to the Front Benchers and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell).

I make two comments based on my time as Minister for Disabled People. Many distinguished colleagues, such as the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen), who is sitting on the Government Front Bench now, have followed me into that position. I remember someone asking me to do more as a Minister to ensure that people with disabilities could access polling stations. That happened early on in my time as Minister, and before the meeting I thought, "What's this about? Everybody has the right to vote, you can vote by post, it doesn't really matter if you can't physically go down to the polling station. You've still got the same right to vote. What's the point?" By the end of the meeting, I had got the point: there is a very early conversion for Ministers and Members who are involved with people with disabilities. They realise that, for those with disabilities, one of the most important things is to be able to do the things that everybody else does—without thinking about them, without it being a big deal—and to have the same access to things which everybody else takes for granted.

My second observation is to offer a memory of Nicholas Scott. I know that we are in the heat of battle and that the Secretary of State for Health gets well stuck into such encounters, but if he looks back at some of his previous press releases he may come to see that crass politicking—the phrase that he used—is reflected in them. No doubt it will feature in future press releases, too. Nevertheless, he gave an impression that Opposition Members either had an artificial interest in disability or did not care very much. Well, those who knew Nicholas Scott and worked with him in the House know how unfair that impression is. I remember talking to Nick about the independent living fund, the disability living allowance and other such issues. He said to me: "One of

the great things about disability issues is that by and large there is a benevolent ratchet. It does not always proceed at the pace those in the disability lobby would like, but it moves inevitably to a position of greater individual choice and the opportunity to exercise more individual power. That is really important for people with disabilities. There is a process whereby we have moved from a position of giving things to people to their then being able to access them entirely of their own accord." I begin my remarks about the motion on that basis.

I do not dispute with Ministers the difficulty of dealing with this matter, nor the issue of quantum. It will be extremely expensive and difficult to manage this for the future—there is no argument about that. It is of course partly about how much money goes in, but it is also about how that money is applied and who has control over it. Serious questions have been asked about precisely what a national care service might mean, how it might be handled locally, and what power there will be for the individual. Those issues are at the heart of our discussions here and the confusion outside that has led so many individuals, including those from disability organisations, to raise the concerns that they have. No matter what politicians may have added in trying to develop the policy in one way or another, those fears are genuine and worrying. I will turn in a moment to some of the things we have heard today as supposed clarifications of the policy.

Let me quote from a letter from one of my constituents. It was produced at the time when the policy had been announced in the Green Paper and people were not sure where it was going, and it reflects a concern that we now know is met because existing benefit holders will not be affected. Nevertheless, it might just as well have been written today by somebody anticipating what the future may hold. I suspect that most of us have similar letters. My constituent wrote:

"At the moment my husband of 82 who is blind and has other health needs, receives attendance allowance at the highest rate. Taking away this allowance would affect greatly his quality of life. He is a very independent gentleman, one who would find it very difficult to allow people he is not familiar with to provide personal care. Because of the allowance he is able to arrange his own help and feel in control of what needs he wants met and not assessed by what social services consider to be his needs. I feel for an older person who remembers pre war conditions. He is unlikely to access services through a local authority, he feels this is going back to the 'State Control, and Work House mentality'. Going without these provisions would greatly affect his quality of life, and mine as I can pay for someone to sit with him for a break with caring."

On one of the websites that discuss these matters, a gentleman called Mick Hall says:

"My own Dad who has now sadly died fell into this category. His reasoning was two fold: before he became ill and frail he had taken responsibility for his life since he was a young boy. He also feared if he let people in through the door he might be taken off without his consent and placed in what he called in a disparaging manner 'a home.'"

When I spoke today to Yvonne Clark, the excellent chief executive of Carers in Bedfordshire, she reiterated that that fear about loss of control was of major concern to people. We have dealt with that a little bit today, or I think we have, in terms of what the policy is, but I am still not quite sure about that. It is important to know how we have got to where we are, and the Minister who winds up will have to clear up the confusion that appeared to exist before half-past 3 and about where we are now.

The Secretary of State almost used the words, "Read my lips—no cash losers." However, that is not what he was saying on 20 November; the quote is included in the excellent pack prepared by the Library. On the same day, Martin Green, chief executive of the English Community Care Association, said this about the Green Paper:

"There seems to be no coherent back story about how it is going to be funded, what the criteria are, how it interfaces with other aspects of the health and social care system, whether the money allocated will be enough, and if it isn't, what is going to be the price paid by other parts of the care budget".

On the same day, the Secretary of State was quoted in *The Independent:*

"Andy Burnham, the Health Secretary, accused the Tories of 'disgraceful scaremongering'"—

that is his view, and he is good at saying so—

"in suggesting benefits could simply disappear. However, he admitted that the Attendance Allowance could be reformed to pay for broader changes in the future. He added that anyone who lost out would be compensated with an 'equivalent level of support'."

If the phrase "Read my lips—no cash losers" was on his mind then and always had been, and if it was never in any doubt, why did he not make it clear to *The Independent* that there would not be anyone who would be compensated with an "equivalent level of support", because no one would actually lose out? I am not certain that *The Independent* was contacted to say, "You've got this wrong".

Mr. Dorrell: Even if what the Secretary of State says today is now the Government's position, it deals only with today's benefit recipients. All the letters that my hon. Friend read out are a cogent argument about a policy that affects the next generation independently of today's benefit recipients.

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend makes the obvious point, although until today I would maintain that there was still a reasonable element of confusion about exactly who would be affected. I suspect that there probably still is. If what the Secretary of State has announced today was so blindingly obvious, why was it not made clear when the policy was being discussed, just two or three weeks ago? Why have so many people been disturbed about it? It is not simply a question of politicians making something out of it; it could have been squashed at a very early stage, but it was not, and it was not squashed because the Secretary of State had not developed the policy far enough. I submit that what we have extracted from him today was not in his brief this morning.

The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), had a similar opportunity to explain what the policy was in his interview with *Disability Now*. The magazine asked whether older people would be affected adversely if attendance allowance were abolished under a reformed social care system. The Under-Secretary rightly said:

"The amount would be put into a social budget of the local authority and people would receive care services in the way that they might use their Attendance Allowance to pay for that now."

[Alistair Burt]

Again, when the concern was raised there was no suggestion whether that would apply now or in the future. It was left hanging. I suggest that there are real concerns about that matter, so my right hon. and hon. Friends are quite right to have tabled a motion that is widely supported and endorsed by agencies outside.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Does my hon. Friend feel that had the policy of "no cash losers" been in place this morning, the Government's amendment would have been phrased differently and not included the words

"an equivalent level of support"?

Alistair Burt: I must admit that if I had been the Secretary of State this morning, I would have ensured that "no cash losers" was written in pretty clear terms, so that we would not have had these exchanges about what an equivalent amount of support means. The door was left wide open, and I suspect that it has been closed at a very late stage during the course of the day. However, we may get further information about that later.

There is concern about why the change is being made. We know about the difficulties in the amounts of money involved, but then we come to a point raised in the letter from my constituent and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood. It is how services are provided that matters. One reader of *Disability Now* wrote:

"The Government seems upset that it doesn't know or control how we're using the money, so it wants to give it to councils so everyone can see who gets what and for what."

That concern about the personal element being taken away is widespread, and the fear is that if the Government do not control it, they do not like it.

Neil Bateman, a welfare rights specialist, has written about the discrepancy in the numbers of those who receive social care and those who receive allowances. That can be interpreted in different ways, but he asked:

"Then what about the numbers? In England, 1.26 million people receive social care services, but 3.82 million receive AA/DLA. Are the proponents of transferring"

those allowances

"really suggesting that over two and half million people would lose these benefits? Would care services be expanded threefold to provide services instead? Fat chance."

He is picking up on that dilemma. It looks as though there is a gap somewhere, and even from what the Secretary has said today, we are not sure how it is going to be closed.

I shall conclude with one last point. The Minister and the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, asked whether we know where the benefit money is currently applied, which is very important. I maintain that the Department for Work and Pensions does not know, but it ought to before making changes. I say that because of an excellent DWP working paper—working paper 58 of this year—in which a researcher is given this task:

"A research plan is proposed at the end which looks towards a large-scale survey starting in about two years' time...which will provide some answers to the questions at issue".

The planned research programme will look at how disability benefits are spent and used, which is precisely the information people need before introducing a Green Paper, and certainly before a White Paper. The proposal is for three major studies, which is exactly what colleagues have been discussing today. It states:

"Understanding Society is a general purpose panel survey covering 40,000 households...The survey is likely to offer a crude scale of impairment, adequate income and deprivation data, and a wide range of social participation indicators, without focusing on issues of special relevance to disabled people."

That will be supplemented by a

"longitudinal disability survey...a highly specialised disability survey based on screening of an initial sample of 50,000 individuals."

The document goes on to state:

"The Policy Studies Institute has been commissioned by DWP to develop a methodology for measuring take-up of DLA and AA."

It is intended that two of those surveys will start next year, but for the third, which looks at take-up of DLA and AA,

"There is no current timetable".

If the Department acknowledges that it needs and wants information on how those allowances are spent, why do we not have it before working out a new way to subsume them into a benefit? I maintain that this is perhaps not the right time to do that. It is certainly not the right time to worry those who are going to come on to the benefit about its future. That may not be the right way to use it.

I return to how I started, and the letter from my constituent and what Nick Scott said. Giving individual people with disabilities the power to choose gives them the sense that they can do exactly what everyone else can do, without having to make major changes and without being supplicants and dependent on someone else. If a national care service in any way replaces that sense of individual power with the sense that something is being given to people with disabilities, however well intentioned that is, we will be missing something. We will be losing what Nick and the hon. Member for Kingswood have always fought for and what we care about. The Minister could begin to clarify the matter this evening, but I suspect that he will have to go some distance to convince those who are rightly concerned about a possible change for the worse in the way this ratchet has been working for so long.

5.53 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who made a reasoned argument. Of course, I accept none of it, but it was done beautifully.

Care of the elderly was my first love when I completed my nurse training and it has continued for many years, because I believe that a society is judged by the way it treats elderly people and by how we prepare for our lives as we grow older and more dependent. That is what this debate is all about, and I very much welcome it. I am relying not on briefing notes from the Library or from my party, nor am I reading out news releases prepared by the Conservative party for its candidates; rather, I relying on the great good sense of my constituents.

In the later part of the summer, I held a consultation with more than 40 individuals, including people from the caring professions, carers and those who are cared for. It was to their comments on disability that I listened. We came together to discuss the White Paper. It was clear in our conversation that those people were not going crazy about benefits or getting upset or anxious.

We were having a conversation because the proposals were undergoing consultation. It was a reasonable, adult, mature conversation between a representative of the Government and those who would be most greatly affected by the proposals, and I very much welcomed it. Following our morning's deliberations, we were able to prepare a submission in response to the Green Paper. I hope that our comments will be taken seriously. I am glad that a solution has not already been offered, apart from the assurances, which were given early on—weeks and weeks ago—about the safeguarding of those benefits.

I know that scaremongering is the reason for today's debate, but I am absolutely delighted about it because it has given me the opportunity, as a Member of Parliament, to engage many more people than I thought I would at the beginning of the consultation. I wrote to many people. I have no interest in what happens to me—this is about the future of older people. Whatever happens at the next general election is of no importance compared with what the future may hold for older people. That is why it is important to have this debate without making silly, snidey remarks to each other.

I was interested to hear the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), because the 60th anniversary of the NHS was a great opportunity to revisit the arguments that were had when the then Labour Government were determined to introduce it. In his very reasonable way, he tried to explain why many of the proposals are unaffordable—that was the gist of his contribution. I only hope that we do not listen to that argument. I believe we have a responsibility to step up to the plate and to tackle what I believe is one of the biggest omissions in care today—bringing together health and social care, and ensuring that we adequately help people as they become infirm and those with disabilities.

I welcome the debate, and I am now able to correspond with many more people. They made some quite interesting suggestions—they are not out of briefing notes or anything else. I have been assured that the benefits are certainly no longer under consideration, but people ask me why the Opposition, who have produced a news release for the next general election, say they are.

I take issue with that. We are talking about a matter of great concern, and our constituents rightly tell us to explain to the Government why we do not believe in wrapping up those benefits and why a national care service, which is a fantastic innovation, is a good idea, but the campaigning has gone on long beyond when those reassurances were made. That brings into question how that whole campaign has been conducted. That brings that campaign into disrepute, and I hope that none of my hon. Friends will support the Opposition motion tonight.

Two constituents of mine, who suffer from severe disabilities themselves, run two excellent groups in Crawley. First is Mrs. Carslake, who runs the Jackdaw club; last weekend the whole club went to Butlins at Bognor, where they had an excellent time—using their DLA to get out and about. The people in that club understand that it is this Government who are committed to their care in the future. The second is Mrs. Kay Turner, whom I visited at home following some concerns that she raised. She runs the GEMMS club, which looks after people with neurological conditions. The members have discussed the Green Paper and the national care service proposal.

Mrs. Turner made an excellent point to me. She said, "I'm not badly off. I was well before I became ill, and the level of care that I have been able to secure through the DLA has ensured that we have a decent life together. We enjoy each other's company and we do not feel as though we are impoverished." We need to protect such people too. Through the empowerment that the DLA has given that couple, she has managed to keep well in herself and to remain active and engaged with many other people.

This is an issue of trust. I have listened carefully to the contributions from Opposition Members and the undeniable stoking up of anxiety to ensure—

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an interesting and well considered argument. Does she agree that the fear generated by the draft press release from the Conservative party makes life even tougher for constituents whose lives are already often difficult?

Laura Moffatt: I am grateful for that intervention, and I agree that the press release will make life tougher for people who will be anxious and concerned by it. Those who blindly follow the party lead and stick their name into a press release and put it out without thought or consideration need to think very carefully. I am very much aware that I have the most marginal seat in the country and I am proud of my 37 majority—and I have the tattoo to prove it. If our opponents issue press releases just to stoke up some concern, that is an issue of trust, and those people should reflect on what they are doing.

It seems to me that this campaign began with a deeply held desire to engage with constituents on the future of social care, but it has been turned into a bandwagon campaign, and that may have something to do with the fact that the Opposition proposal—hastily put together at the party conference—for a one-off payment for those willing to go into residential care, has bombed. There is no question about that. None of my constituents is talking about that proposal—the only game in town is about how we can provide care at home for family members. It is not about people who are well at present signing up to go into a nursing home in the future. There is a connection between those two events that has caused the Conservatives to jump on this bandwagon.

I hope that when we have the Second Reading of the Bill that will be the first step towards the national care service, our constituents will understand that they can trust the proposals and their benefits will not be affected. We need to have a proper debate, as many hon. Members have said today. We cannot go on avoiding the issue of providing care for elderly people with dignity and decency. I hope that after this robust debate today we will be able to make progress and look in detail at how we ensure that everybody can be confident that they will be able to live in a decent, happy and secure home in the future.

6.6 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich, North) (Con): The reason for today's debate is the Government's failure to be entirely clear about how they will fund their three proposed options for a national care service in their Green Paper. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) pointed out that all of us—at least on this side of the

[Chloe Smith]

House—have been victims of smear campaigns in elections that we have fought, whether in relation to TV licences, pensions or Sure Start, and now this issue. Our campaign is not a smear campaign and I agree with those hon. Members who have said that the subject is far more serious than that. We should treat it with the respect that it deserves.

If the Government think that they can achieve something in their last six months, let us take them at their word. Let us have that debate on behalf of our vulnerable constituents. Let us proceed with caution, but also with clarity. We need a debate that contains costs and decisions—I hate to break that news to Labour Members. I hope that when he sums up the Minister will answer the question posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) about cash benefits. She asked whether, if there are to be no cash losers, the benefits will be available to be spent as people want to spend them.

Jonathan Shaw *indicated assent.*

Chloe Smith: That is good to know. Earlier, the Secretary of State seemed to be having a Bill Clinton moment, in which we were not sure what the meaning of "is" was, or a Lewis Carroll moment in which the words were to mean what he said they were to mean. Perhaps instead it is one of those irregular verbs from a comedy programme that we all know and love, in which the Minister proposes a policy, we scrutinise it and the people outside think that the Government are in chaos. I would not want anybody to think that.

People receive attendance allowance or DLA because they need it. Many of us have pointed out that those benefits are based on need, not means, and that is an important point. Age Concern, which does great work in Norwich and Norfolk as a whole, as it does across the country, supports those benefits because they help older people to meet the daily living costs of disability. There is no question in anybody's mind that these benefits are undeserved or that they should be tossed around as discretionary options. In fact, they are essential to anybody's idea of social justice.

People in my constituency use those benefits for vital daily activities, such as assistance with washing, dressing or eating. They use them to carry on life in an enjoyable and meaningful way, and we all agree about that—the Minister nods again. A younger constituent came to my surgery on Saturday: he is totally blind, and he uses DLA to get around the city. He is another example of those who use it for enabling activities.

I recently met with carers and I hosted a web chat on Friday for a forum called Chill 4 Us. I spoke online with carers who, day in and day out, give up their time to care for others. Their passion on this issue was clear and powerful. None of them wants to lose DLA and AA because they need and appreciate them greatly as cash benefits. Sadly, however, I got the impression that the only chance they have to say that is through such virtual forums—we were there tapping away. That is one of the difficulties in this debate. It can be very constricting for people who need us to take the subject seriously and treat it with respect and maturity. Quite simply, living with the kind of care needs for which DLA and AA cater is hard and can be expensive. They are needs-based benefits. It is one small piece of help that society can give, so it should hardly be controversial to say, "Let's not abolish something that the elderly, disabled or ill need and value."

I want to highlight the vulnerability that comes with such need. Fooling around with such benefits carries a weighty risk. A younger constituent aged, say, 35 might be able to plan for the future if changes are made to the system now. Many today have mentioned the needs of the future cohort; from what Ministers have said, it seems that today's cohort might be fine. However, the many people who receive DLA or AA after 65 might be less able to accommodate change. In many cases, they have made financial choices for their retirement that leave them and their families little room for manoeuvre. In other cases, people are already living on precarious means—we have heard plenty of figures today—and the abolition, if enacted, could represent a loss of up to £60 a week. That would be serious in many cases.

Some recipients of DLA and AA are physically ill or disabled, and their lives could become severely restricted without that assistance. People suffering from dementia or other mental illnesses, too, are particularly vulnerable to change. Making any changes that affect those social groups is difficult and complex. Getting the change right is paramount, and of course we are all taking that seriously today. However, debating the changes without causing immense anxiety is another thing entirely. The uncertainty generated by the Government's proposals in July's Green Paper has caused enormous concern and distress for people who are already vulnerable. Many Members have recounted what they have heard in their constituencies.

Forgive me for saying this, but it is incumbent on the Government to exercise caution and clarity in their approach. We also need flexibility and personal and local control at the end of whatever proposal emerges. I am sure that no one has an argument with a system that aims to be fair, simple and affordable. That is wonderful. However, we have serious concerns about a system that removes or reduces older people's ability to choose what to do. Choice and control must shine through any reforms that we make to the care system.

By choice and control, we mean the support that people need to choose how they overcome their concerns in their own way. Abolishing AA and DLA is a serious risk to such individual control. I would like a Minister to explain the paradox clearly. If the wording that has rather tortuously been made available still leaves open the option of abolishing AA and DLA, we need to know why the Government think that that maintains choice and control for individuals. That question is still on the table.

I would also like Ministers to explain, even after today's twists and turns, a policy that seeks to reallocate a cash benefit that grant money to people who need it and allows them spend it how they want, and to add it instead to a nationalised system that could simply eat it up through the weight of bureaucracy.

Alistair Burt: Quite right.

Chloe Smith: Quite right, as my hon. Friend says.

Let us turn to the ground on which the Government might like the debate to take place. If there are to be no cash losers, why are we talking about abolishing two benefits—or not abolishing them; I may have to grant the Minister that, although I do not think that he is

guaranteeing not to abolish them—and replacing them with the same? If there will be no cash losers, and some cash winners or cash neutrals, at the end of the process, why are we having much of this debate at all? That key question, too, is still on the table.

The Green Paper appears to contain a further argument that the aim is to reduce complexity for older people by merging funding streams. The paper states:

"Having two different funding streams means that older people have to apply separately",

which can be off-putting. The Green Paper states that there is a case for integrating those streams

"to improve the effectiveness of state funding."

I would like the Minister to explain what kind of state funding can be more effective than meeting the rawest needs of people in a way that gives them power over their own solutions.

I would also like the Minister to acknowledge that, by his own argument for reducing complexity, there is so much more to do to help not only that group of people, but the millions in the UK who despair of ever getting what they deserve from the state. I am talking about the country we live in, where almost daily in the past 12 years, we have had application forms, means tests, quangos, queues and hoops added to every conceivable aspect of the public sector. It is no wonder that we are talking again about a group of people who are vulnerable to change and worried about more burdens being added as they simply try to get on with what they want to do.

To make a constructive point, it is essential to provide good information to people in any new care system. I shall mention one local example. Norwich has several day care centres provided by the local authority. I am sad that the Secretary of State is not here to hear this point, because judging by something he said earlier, I think he knows about it. He will also know that Norfolk county council is consulting on its options and he may know that I, as a local MP, will be standing up for my constituents on those options, rather than playing party politics.

The local authority is facing ever less funding in future, in a period of a staggering national deficit, and a move to personalised budgets. Under the pressure of at least two burdens from national Government, therefore, the council is seeking to focus its limited means on those who need its help the most. In particular, we are talking about dementia needs and so-called re-ablement requirements. Most people have no problem with that. The rub has come as the council has reviewed against its projected future requirements the usage of three day care centres that it runs. The elderly members of at least one of those facilities—the Silver Rooms—in my constituency are extremely anxious about their future. They are frail and some have physical and mental disabilities.

I raise that example not only because, if local facilities are to close, losing AA would in many cases be a double blow for those people, but because their plight illustrates particularly well why a national care service would do well to excel in the provision of good information. If the personalisation of care budgets moves from being a twinkle in a planner's eye to a fully workable, local scheme, my constituents will need to know where they can spend their money. That remains true in a world with or without AA and DLA, and with or without any of the options provided in a national care service. My constituents will want the comfort of knowing that, with their personal budget in hand, their day centre, or whatever they choose to spend their future benefits on, will still be open for business. If a national care service can provide such information and support, that is wonderful. However, if it cannot and only succeeds in removing cash benefits that might be seen as an effective forerunner to personal budgets and gobbling them up in a monster of a scheme that provides no improvement, we really are in trouble.

I emphasise the gravity of getting this right. It is clear that reform of social care is greatly needed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) referred to the Wanless report. Others will be familiar with the statistics on exactly what we will be facing in 10, 20 or 40 years, when perhaps even I will be retiring. Perhaps more shocking, in a survey conducted by the Department of Health in July, I understand that more than half of those asked thought that the total cost of a residential care home for an elderly person would be £10,000 or less and that more than a quarter assumed that it would be free, so in addition to the demographic bomb going off, we are also battling a problem of public information. People need that information. Any proposals in the Green Paper will not be implemented until 2014, which should give us time to pin down the Secretary of State to some clear language. The Government must act now to alert people to that bomb.

Given that so many people rightly fear for the future of social care and are vulnerable to changes in the system, I want answers to some questions in addition to those put so ably by my hon. Friend: Why would the Government seek to remove an obvious area of stability, in the shape of AA and DLA, for vulnerable people? Why would we seek to abolish the only area of clarity for many people in the care system at present? Why would we do away with a cash benefit that goes where it is most needed? We need a clear definition of "no cash losers". Why would we seek to reduce people's independence and open the door to an unwieldy and ever larger bureaucracy? Finally, before they talk about the serpentine amendments that we have seen today—or afterwards, or indeed during that discussion—will the Government give the proposals in their Green Paper the gravity and maturity of decision that they deserve? Will they be able to emerge from all that and talk about social justice on the other side?

6.20 pm

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): I want to concentrate on the proposal to abolish attendance allowance, apparently now only for new claimants, and disability living allowance for the over-65s. As we know, that would affect 2.4 million vulnerable pensioners, including 1.6 million who currently claim attendance allowance and 800,000 over-65s who are on disability living allowance. However, whatever happens to the current claimants, presumably we are talking about higher numbers in future, so those are the minimum numbers at least.

We have received various reassurances from Ministers in recent weeks and months. They have suggested that people will receive similar services, rather than money. Previously, we were told that

"people will be guaranteed an equivalent level of support".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2009; Vol. 501, c. 241.]

[John Mason]

One of the problems in this debate is the lack of clarity about the phrase "equivalent level of support", because frankly it can mean absolutely anything to absolutely anyone. The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) said that reassurances had been given, but the first reassurances that I heard were given yesterday, at Department for Work and Pensions questions. I am not sure when she thought she had heard reassurances before that.

Quite a lot of concerns have been expressed, not least today, about some of the statements that have been made and the phrases that have been used. The Secretary of State said that the present system was "not sustainable" and that the cost could rise by 50 per cent. A number of hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire), have talked about a demographic time bomb, which the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith) also mentioned. I feel that those statements are slightly over the top, because the reality is that we, as a Parliament, and the Government need to set priorities. The question is: what priorities are they to be? If we are saying that the present pot of money that looks after the elderly and vulnerable will continue to be the same pot, despite an increasing number in those groups, I would very much question whether that is the right priority.

Yesterday we received clarification that those already receiving the benefits in question would get

"the same level of cash support." [*Official Report*, 7 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 6.]

The Secretary of State said today that he had "said it all along" and that there would be no cash losers. However, to reiterate what other Members have said, we did not really hear that, and it might have been helpful if he had said it a bit earlier. Although that statement seems to be reassuring, it still leaves new folk looking ahead and wondering what will happen if they do not receive attendance allowance in future. That seems to go in the opposite direction from the Welfare Reform Act 2009, in which I was involved in the Public Bill Committee. Great play was made of the right to control and all parties agreed on that.

I would like to make a number of points. The first is that attendance allowance and DLA do a lot of good. I should like to quote again—I have quoted from this before—from a paper that I received from SAMH—the Scottish Association for Mental Health. What SAMH says is probably typical of what a lot of similar groups would say. SAMH refers to the 194,000 people of working age in Scotland and the 145,000 over-65s who receive attendance allowance and to the 110,000 older people who receive DLA. The advantages that SAMH quotes are similar to those that we have heard about already this evening:

"For example, people with mental health problems can experience much smaller social networks and can feel isolated and alone. Anxiety may mean that a person feels unable to leave their home by themselves. People can choose to use their DLA to use a taxi to access social activities and cover the costs of an informal carer to provide the additional support and assistance needed. Without this additional support the person could experience greater anxiety and social isolation, increasing the potential of a period of hospitalisation or more intensive and costly community support."

SAMH also says:

"Disability benefits and free personal care enable older people in Scotland to remain independent in the community, providing older people with a personal budget to help with their care and support needs. This could include covering the costs of a friend or family member coming to the home in the morning to help the person get out of bed, prepare meals or do shopping and cleaning. Any changes to disability benefits could affect the provision of this care and support and result in an older person needing more costly forms of social care in the home, or lead to a person moving into residential care if they were not able to manage their household."

It has been said before, but it is worth re-emphasising, that much of the present system involves unpaid carers, of whom we hear a lot, and that the danger of just transferring even the same money to local authority or to any other control is that we will get less of a service.

I enjoyed being involved in the Public Bill Committee on the Welfare Reform Act 2009, in which other Members who are present were also involved. It is worth quoting again from the then Bill and from a clause in the part dealing with the right to control. It said:

"The purpose of this Part is to enable disabled people aged 18 or over to exercise greater choice"

not the present choice, but greater choice—

"in relation to, and greater control over, the way in which relevant services (as defined by section 31) are provided to or for them"

The Government seemed to be saying—and I agree with them—that they wanted to move in the direction of individuals having greater control over the services. However, what we are seeing now is a move towards less control. Nobody has explained to me—perhaps the Minister could explain this evening—exactly how those two things are meant to relate to each other.

Previously I asked—and would like to ask again—what would happen to the money in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Will it be handed over as a lump sum? Will attendance allowance be based on need or will it be based on the Barnett formula? Will it be open to the devolved Governments to continue with attendance allowance in Scotland and Wales, even when it is eventually phased out in England? I did not quite hear the Secretary of State's earlier answer, but if I understood him correctly, he said that he would brief the devolved Governments. I hope that he would go a little further than just briefing them and enter into a consultation with them on how the proposals might work out.

We have received the assurance that only new claimants will be affected, but that leaves a number of questions about the future. Who will be paying for the protection? Will the money go through the local authority or will it be transitionally protected under the social security system? Will it affect local authority budgets, and what happens if local authorities cannot or will not pay? Is the money inflation proof, or will it not be increased each year in line with inflation and thus gradually reduced in real terms? If that is good enough for existing recipients, why should other disabled elderly people not receive at least the same? We will end up with a two-tier system, and potentially for quite a long time.

What happens to people on the middle or high rate of DLA if they reach 65 after the new system is in place? Will they be protected or will they lose the benefit when they reach 65? The current protection appears to affect those on benefit at the time of change, not afterwards, but if so many people are to be protected, what is the point? Should we not continue with something much closer to the present system? What would the impact be on carer's allowance? It is not particularly generous at

the moment, at £53.10, but if it is abolished, what will happen to someone who looks after a person who receives attendance allowance or DLA at the higher or middle rate? Similarly, will there be an impact on pension credit?

Locally, the Labour campaign against me often refers to how often I might vote with the Conservatives, but sometimes it forgets to say that, very occasionally, the Conservatives are right and the Labour party is wrong. I must admit that, in this particular debate, I remain suspicious of the Conservatives' motives. I am suspicious of what they might cut instead, if they are going to protect these benefits. However, it is hard to say that Labour has not moved further to the right of the Conservatives on this issue.

The Government have rightly given undertakings about DLA for the under-65s, and, yesterday, new reassurances that those receiving cash will continue to do so. I suggest, however, that it was cynical to get people this worried in the first place, and then apparently to give ground. In the longer term, how can it be right to change the system to give future claimants less control over their benefits?

6.31 pm

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was enjoying the speech made by the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason), until that last bit. He can rest assured that he can vote with us; he does not have to convince himself that we are right, but he can be absolutely certain that the Government are wrong. It was also a delight almost to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith), who demonstrated in her thoughtful speech her clear understanding of and care for her constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) set out our case comprehensively and—despite what the Secretary of State said—in a measured, thoughtful way. He exposed the weakness of the Government's case. My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), a former Health Secretary, made a thoughtful and typically well-informed speech that raised a number of important questions.

This debate has exposed a Government who are in disarray and running scared on this issue. The Secretary of State—wherever he happens to be—has today effectively holed his own Green Paper below the water line. We did not think that it held the answers anyway, so, from our point of view, that is welcome, but he has effectively destroyed it. He changed the language today. Up until this morning, when the Government's amendment to the motion repeated the words

"would continue to receive an equivalent level of support",

Ministers had stuck doggedly to that language—not that anyone knew what it meant. Many interpreted it to mean that benefits such as attendance allowance and disability living allowance for those over the age of 65 would be taken away and put into a social care system, leading to less control and independence.

Despite what the Secretary of State said, those concerns were not got up by the Opposition; 105 MPs of all parties have signed early-day motion 1, including 39 Labour Members. I think that I heard the hon. Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) correctly when he said that, despite having signed that early-day motion, he was going to vote against exactly the same wording on today's Order Paper, purely because today's motion had been tabled by us. He has a good reputation on these issues, and I think that he let himself down in making that argument.

Roger Berry: That was not the reason that I gave. I was angry at the way in which the Opposition have scared a number of elderly and disabled people by making the untrue statement that the Government had already made their decision. They have not, and to say that they have is not worthy of support from anyone.

Mr. Harper: The hon. Gentleman's intervention is inaccurate. He knows that, outside the House, every single organisation representing disabled people has opposed taking away these national disability benefits. He said that himself. These concerns were not got up by the Opposition. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire quoted the Disability Alliance's survey, which had asked its members whether attendance allowance and other benefits should be taken away, and found that 93 per cent. said no. RADAR, a pan-disability organisation, said:

"RADAR is adamant no one is getting their mitts on vital extra-cost benefits. These benefits are to help meet a wide range of extra costs, not just care, but extra heating, laundry and so on. Take them away and people would lose choice, control and independence and more people would fall into poverty."

There is an almost infinite list of quotes such as that, but I will read out just one more. Leonard Cheshire Disability says that its policy on this issue is that

"we have always opposed any move to take DLA care component and AA into broader social care funding and will continue to do so."

Those concerns are shared not only by Members on both sides of the House but by all those organisations, so to pretend that they have somehow been got up by the Opposition as part of a scaremongering campaign—

Roger Berry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harper: No, I will not give way again. You got it wrong the first time.

What did we hear today from the Secretary of State? As my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said, he effectively said "Read my lips—no cash losers". Some might think that that was all well and good, but there is a problem for the Government. What the Secretary of State—who still has not turned up for the winding-up speeches—said today is not compatible with the amendment that his party tabled to our motion this morning. It is actually closer to our motion than to the amendment. It is also contradicted on a number of occasions by his own Green Paper.

There are three options on page 95 of the Green Paper, which the Government say are their favoured options. They are the partnership model, the insurance model and the comprehensive model. They all use disability benefits to extend care to those who do not get it now. The Secretary of State's saying today that there would effectively be no cash losers rules out all the Government's preferred options in the Green Paper.

On page 61, the Green Paper talks about extending the system so that everyone gets some help. It says that

"we want to consider the different ways in which this could be funded, including through integrating funding from the social care and benefits systems."

[Mr. Harper]

That is incompatible with giving everyone who currently gets those benefits the same amount of cash as they are getting now, so that there would be no cash losers.

On page 98, the Green Paper states:

"We want to use the money that is in the system to make sure that everyone who qualifies for care and support will get some help with paying for their care."

However, if care is to be extended to those who do not currently get it, the money will have to come from within the system, which means that it will have to come from those disability benefits. If the Secretary of State is now ruling out touching those benefits, he is ruling out this proposal in the Green Paper. Given that some people are not getting care at the moment, the costs will have to go up. If there are to be no cash losers, that will simply not add up.

On page 103, the Green Paper refers to the King's Fund report, and says that

"if the social care system were able to mostly meet the care needs of people who may currently only be supported through the disability benefits system, there would be less need for some of these benefits, and there might be a case for integrating some disability benefits such as Attendance Allowance into the care and support system."

That is exactly what the Government were proposing, but it is not what the Secretary of State said this afternoon.

On page 104, the Green Paper says:

"We can use the taxpayers' money that is already in the system to provide everyone with some care."

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire pointed out, page 109 of the Green Paper makes it clear that there will be more people getting social care funding under the national care service than at present. According to the Green Paper, the only place that the money can come from is those disability benefits, as the Government have ruled out funding the increased spending from taxation, which I know is the favoured system of hon. Member for Kingswood.

So the Secretary of State cannot have it both ways. If there are to be no cash losers, this Green Paper is not worth the paper it is printed on. Page 114—Members, especially Labour Members, will be pleased to know that this is the last quote—states:

"The state would put in existing funding from taxes which are used for social care and any disability benefits that were integrated, and would use this to support the costs of everyone's care."

That is not about ensuring that there are no cash losers, or that people could have the money and spend how they wanted to, on supporting their independence and choice; it is about using the money to support the cost of everyone's care. That is clear. None of the preferred options can be reconciled with what the Secretary of State said this afternoon.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, asked an important question. If it is true that there are to be no cash losers, and that people will be able to keep the money, will they be able to spend it as they choose—as they can now—on supporting their independence and choice and enabling them to live the life that they want to live? The Secretary of State, who still is not here, could not—or would not—answer that question. So will the Minister tell us whether people will be able to spend that money as freely as they can now?

The Secretary of State made a point of quoting my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), and he was quite right. We support what the Government want to do on extending personalisation. Indeed, the Welfare Reform Bill allows social care funding to be integrated into the right to control only because we pressed for that in this House, although we were opposed by the Government—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State has finally joined us. Conservatives in the other place, together with Liberal Democrats and Cross-Bench peers, put together a majority which meant that the Government were forced to table their own amendments, with cross-party support, to do the opposite of what they were going to do when the Bill was in Committee in this House. If anyone looks at the record, they can see that that is exactly right; it is very clear.

The question for the Minister to answer is why until today the Government were sticking to the line that people would be given "an equivalent level of support", which is what it says in the Government amendment, and only now that the Secretary of State effectively said, "Read my lips—no cash losers." As I have comprehensively demonstrated, what the Secretary of State said this afternoon cannot be reconciled with what is in his social care Green Paper; he has effectively holed it below the water line. The Minister needs to answer those questions. He may not wish to answer the Opposition, but he needs to answer his own colleagues, particularly those who signed early-day motion 1. He also needs to answer respected Members of all parties and all those organisations outside the House that are very concerned about the Government's plans. Will he set out just what Government policy now is—what it was this morning, what it was at 4.06 pm when the Secretary of State appeared to change it from the Dispatch Box, which I would like the Minister to confirm, and what it is now? I commend the motion to the House; we look forward with interest to hearing the Minister's defence.

6.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Jonathan Shaw): This has been an important debate about what many Members have described as a policy that affects every member of our community. It is one of the most difficult issues we need to grasp, not least because, as we all know, we are living longer. In the next 25 years, the number of 85-year-olds will double, the number of people reaching 100 years will quadruple and the ratio of people in work to people in retirement, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) said, will become 2:1 rather than 4:1 as it is at present. We thus need a debate about how we shape a new national care service that will meet the demands within our communities and meet the higher expectations people quite rightly have in 2009.

People are rightly no longer willing to be just passive recipients of what they are told is good for them. They want to be involved, they want to be consulted and they want to help shape the future. That is why the Government have set out in the Green Paper the available options so that we can have the big care debate. We have had some 40 formal big care debates and I know that hon. Members have had them in their communities, and we thank them for the contributions they have sent to the Department. I have certainly spoken to a great many people as I have travelled around the country.

We have said clearly that no one currently in receipt of attendance allowance or disability living allowance at the time of reform would be a cash loser. It is also important that alongside these reforms, as referred to by a number of hon. Members, we plan to provide greater power for people to control the public funds that we make available to them from the various funding streams. Within the "right to control" legislation in the Welfare Reform Act 2007, we made provision to cover access to work, the disabled facilities grant, the independent living fund, supported employment and, of course, as the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper) mentioned, adult social care.

I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman put forward amendments in the debate on the Welfare Reform Bill and that I opposed them. We then had a mature and wider debate in the House of Lords—*[Interruption.]* If I am to accept the point the hon. Gentleman made in good faith, I hope that we can think about how we should frame this discussion. We are all talking about having a mature debate, so I accept that I opposed that amendment and I accept that in the debate in the other place, the amendment was put forward by my noble Friend Lord McKenzie of Luton and by Baroness Campbell of Surbiton, who commands respect throughout Parliament. She said that the changes we made to accept adult social care were done through co-production and she welcomed the way in which all parties had worked together. That is how we need to approach this issue rather than in the disappointing way in which the hon. Member for Forest of Dean chose to present it on this occasion. He normally does a lot better than that.

Bob Russell: In that spirit of reconciliation and unity of purpose, will the Minister explain why he hopes that the 39 signatories to early-day motion 1 will vote against exactly the same motion in a few minutes' time?

Jonathan Shaw: I am sure that my colleagues will listen closely to my arguments. The hon. Gentleman mentions the early-day motion, and it is interesting to note that Conservative Members laid great store by it. They have followed the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) in that respect, yet despite that great store, only a paltry 16 of them could bring themselves to sign it until recently, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) quite rightly pointed out.

To return to the point I was making about the benefit streams and adult social care, what distinguishes them is that some are national and some are local; some are national means-tested and some local means-tested. It is our ambition to bring all of those within the ambit of allowing people to choose to spend how they want. A number of hon. Members characterised social care from the local authority as a very constrained way of allowing such flexibility, but I would say that they should find out what people are doing with direct payments from social care.

Let me give hon. Members an example. I recently attended a Mind event where a lady said that she had received direct payments as part of her individual budget. She had a mental health condition and she was using that resource to pay for dance classes, which were not organised by the local authority. By using that money, she found a new way of socialising, she learned to dance and it provided her a springboard on which to find her way back into work. She certainly will be able to continue to have such classes in the future, and I say that clearly—

Mr. Harper *rose—*

Jonathan Shaw: I will answer the hon. Gentleman's point, if he will allow me. This is an important issue about the transitional arrangements, which several hon. Members raised. Existing claimants of AA and DLA will continue to have the flexibility to spend the resource as they wish. The other important point is that we are providing flexibility in terms of a number of different budget headings for the same reasons that a number of hon. Members put forward to explain why AA and DLA are a good thing. That is happening. Saying that the provision of those resources is "constrained" and characterising it as such is wrong.

May I also say that one of the—

Mr. Dorrell *rose—*

Jonathan Shaw: No, I will not give way to the right hon. Gentleman for the moment, because I want to address some important points that were put to me.

Mr. Dorrell *rose—*

Jonathan Shaw: If he will sit down, I will proceed with my answer. I will come on to deal with other points—*[Interruption.]* I will give way to the shadow spokesman first and then to the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell).

Mr. Harper: I am still not sure that the Minister has answered the question put earlier by my right hon. Friend. He knows that with individual budgets, people cannot spend the money entirely how they want because they have to agree that the spending will meet their care needs. At the moment, DLA and AA can be spent on anything they want, with a completely free choice, so will the Minister confirm that all the money people receive under the new system can be spent exactly how they choose to spend it?

Jonathan Shaw: During the transitional arrangements, people in receipt of AA and DLA will, when it comes from the local authority, have that cash sum as well as their flexibility protected—along the lines that hon. Ladies and Gentlemen are inquiring about. I hope that I have now satisfied them on that point.

Mr. Dorrell: A moment ago, the Minister appeared to argue that a cash-limited local authority social services budget was no more constrained than an entitlement-led White Paper budget. Is that really his position?

Jonathan Shaw: I did not say that at all. I was referring to the flexibility with which people could spend the resources available to them.

Let me respond to some of the points that have been made. The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) made a thoughtful speech exposing the cynicism with which the Conservative party has been scaremongering around the country with press releases. He also asked important questions about arrangements for the work force. We shall need to address ourselves to some of those details in the White Paper, especially the relationship between disability living allowance and attendance allowance and other benefits. Other Members also mentioned the work force. We have seen progress since the Care Standards Act 2000. At the time of its introduction, 80 per cent. of the 1 million or so work force had no qualifications. We have increased the number of people with qualifications by 20 per cent.

[Jonathan Shaw]

The hon. Member for Northavon referred to carer's allowance in particular. We have been working with carers as well. Many want to work, but find the benefits system confusing. That is why organisations such as the Princess Royal Trust for Carers and Carers UK have welcomed the work of our care partnership managers in Jobcentre Plus. About £20 million has been invested to ensure that they combine all the support mechanisms, ensuring that there is good information for carers so that they can join the labour market.

Mr. Harper: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Jonathan Shaw: I will give way briefly, but that will be it.

Mr. Harper: I am grateful to the Minister. Can he confirm that those whose full social care needs are met by local authorities will also continue to receive their attendance allowance and disability living allowance? Will those allowances be fully protected?

Jonathan Shaw: Yes, they will.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling rightly referred to the scaremongering of Conservative Members. She spoke of the need to secure for a consensus of the kind that we secured for pension reform, and I hope that that happens. We saw the beginnings of it in the debate. The right hon. Member for Charnwood spoke of the need for reform, but did not refer to the need to pay for it.

Along with a number of other Members, I set out the issues relating to a changing demography. We need to find the necessary resources. We have included in the Green Paper options that would provide far more support for care than is provided at present. The current system involves ever more constraint, and if we continue as we are, the constraint and means-testing will continue to increase. Our proposals provide some solutions that can be debated throughout the country.

Opposition Members asked about devolution. Of course it is right for us to have discussions with the Scottish and Welsh Assembly Governments. Any settlement under the new system will have to take account of social care and health, which are devolved matters.

I perceived a lack of support for local authorities. I think that they do a very good job, but it was only my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood who talked of the good work that they do. We often characterise all local authorities by highlighting poor performance. That is why we need a national care service. Disabled people's organisations that support such a service speak of the difference in service from one town to another. They have drawn attention to the need for portability, which does not currently exist, and the struggle that they have to undertake to obtain services. They do not want to have to jump through such hoops again. Our proposals give them the opportunity that they want.

The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), a former Minister for disabled people, mentioned Nick Scott. I have heard kind words said about Nick Scott during my travels around the country. The hon. Gentleman will know, however, that next year will mark the 40th anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970—the first legislation introduced to provide rights and services for disabled people not just in this country but anywhere in the world—and that that is thanks to the first Minister for disabled people, Lord Morris.

The hon. Gentleman was right to observe that as time has gone on, we have given people more choice and control so that they can be the architects of the support that they receive. Adult social care is an important component of people's independence, which is why we need it to be more available rather than perpetuating the present constraint.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), who brought her professional knowledge to the debate, had held consultations in her constituency. As I have found in my travels around the country, it is interesting to sit down and engage in a calm and clear debate, helping people to understand the demographic issues that the country faces and the need to find solutions.

The hon. Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith) made a measured contribution to the debate. She talked of the need for flexibility, and I agreed with what she said. She talked of meeting someone in her constituency who was blind. She will know that the Government have accepted an amendment from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) which will increase disability living allowance for totally blind people from 2011.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason) said that he did not trust the Tories. In 1979, the Tories made no reference to the fact that they would cut pensions when they got into power. I think that buyers will need to be extremely wary. We have heard very little from those on the Tory Front Bench, or indeed from the Tories in general, about what they expect from a future social care system. We have heard nothing about domiciliary care. We have heard some half-baked ideas about residential care, which fell apart from one day to the next and did not stand up to even the slightest scrutiny. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) smiles, but I think that even he acknowledges that.

What did the Tories give pensioners? They gave them 18 months in which to wait for an operation, whereas our party gave them a maximum of 18 weeks. They produced pensioner poverty, whereas our party produced pension credit. We provided bus passes, but all that we have seen from the Tory party is cynicism and scaremongering. They have focused—as they prefer to—on the 3,000 richest estates for which they want to provide tax cuts. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote for the amendment.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 233, Noes 297.

Division No. 15] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clegg, rh Mr. Nick
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maples, Mr. John
Mason, John
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Mr. Andrew
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
James Duddridge and Jeremy Wright

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas

Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, ~~Mrs~~ Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Killoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Speller, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Watson, Mr. Tom
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Wooltas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
David Wright and
Mr. Dave Watts

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's proposals to create the National Care Service, the first national, universal, entitlement-based system for care and support in England; notes that the proposals will deliver real benefits to people including wider provision of prevention services, a single needs assessment across England and information, guidance and advice for all; recognises that in 20 years' time, 1.5 million more people will have care and support needs, whilst the number of people aged over 85 will have doubled; further notes that around 400,000 people will benefit from enactment of the Personal Care at Home Bill, which contains no proposed changes to disability benefits; acknowledges that the Government is considering responses to the Big Care Debate consultation before any decisions are made between a range of options for the National Care Service; understands that changes to disability living allowance for under-65s as part of the introduction of a National Care Service have been ruled out; and welcomes the reassurance that, if disability benefits for older people were to be reformed as part of the National Care Service, those receiving the affected benefits at the time of reform would continue to receive an equivalent level of support.

Local Government Finances

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I have to tell the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.17 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that this year's local government finance settlement will increase average Band D council tax to over £120 a month each year despite inflation being negative; cautions that this rise will mean that council tax has more than doubled since 1997 with a third of the increase in the basic state pension being negated by council tax rises; expresses concern at the effect of the Government's social care plans on council budgets; urges the Government to help fund councils in delivering a council tax freeze in England, as is already in operation in Scotland; and asserts that this year's settlement will increase the domestic tax burden at a time when households are already having to restrain their spending as a result of the prolonged recession.

This is an interesting opportunity for the House, it seems to me. For once, this year we were denied something of an annual ritual. Normally—on occasion, this does not happen, but it is normal practice—the local government finance settlement is announced to a waiting world by the Minister in an oral statement in the House, so that hon. Members can ask the Minister about it. It is usually quite a lively exchange. This year, for reasons that have not yet been made apparent although I hope that they will be, the Minister chose to announce the local government finance settlement in a written statement. I am at a loss to understand why.

It might be because of great shyness on the part of the Ministers, or because, as a consequence of the recent reshuffle, they have not quite worked out who is responsible. The Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination might have been engaged in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on that day; or perhaps—I hope not to be uncharitable—the Government did not want the local government finance settlement to be dissected and debated in this Chamber. Always anxious to be helpful, we have used our Opposition day debate to ensure that it can be. I think it is a shame that the Government have forced us to do that, because one would have thought that something of such significance would have been debated in Government time.

This is not a technical or inconsequential matter. The local government funding settlement affects every family and every community in the country. The sums involved amount to, at a modest estimate, about £47 billion in 2010-11. The fact that the allocation was slipped out, rather than announced as it has been in previous years, can only mean, it seems to us, that the Government have something to hide.

What the Government have to hide is apparent from a reading of the settlement document. I do not pretend that it is necessarily the most exciting document that right hon. and hon. Members will have read, but it is important. I was taken by the introductory note that is helpfully supplied with it, which sums up many of the problems from which local government finance suffers. Immediately under a statement that the document is the explanatory note for the local government finance settlement, it says:

"This guide replaces the 'Plain English Guide to the Local Government Finance Settlement'".

[Robert Neill]

It might be simply for economy of printing that a word has disappeared, but it is, unfortunately, indicative of the layer upon layer of complexity that has accrued to the local government finance settlement in recent years. I am sure that that was genuinely inadvertent, but it is not a happy start.

When one gets through to the logarithms that take up the better part of several pages, one can understand why the Government might not want too much dissection of Government funding, but when one has ploughed through that, certain things become apparent. Despite the wording of the amendments, which I shall address in due course, there is no getting away from the fact that the Government do not want a debate on Labour's record over the past 12 years on council tax, which is a key issue in relation to this local government finance settlement. If implemented, the settlement will mean that council tax bills have more than doubled on Labour's watch—the percentage figure is 106 per cent. If anyone wants the exact figures, the average band D payment has gone up from £688 when Labour came to office to £1,414; it has more than doubled. The Government do not really want to have a debate about that.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is it not also the case that, under this Government, there has been a huge switch in the grant, from the south to the north and from the rural to the urban? Might they wish to conceal that as well?

Robert Neill: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right and I shall return to that point later. That switch has been commented on by a number of independent commentators who are respected academics. One has only to look at the tabulations that are set out in the report to see quite clearly that, for reasons that are not yet apparent but that I hope will be apparent after Ministers have attempted to justify the position, there has been exactly such a shift.

Mr. Lee Scott (Ilford, North) (Con) *rose—*

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD) *rose—*

Robert Neill: I shall give way to my hon. Friend, who caught my eye first, and then to the hon. Lady.

Mr. Scott: Does my hon. Friend agree that another problem is that Ministers continually make announcements about moneys that have to be spent by local authorities out of the grants that are given, but that the Government never properly fund them?

Robert Neill: The debate on additional unfunded burdens is a long-running one, particularly under this Government. It is something that I recall from when I was involved in local government as a councillor, and it has got worse, not better. I shall give an example relating to this year's settlement that has been flagged up to me by the Local Government Association.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Robert Neill: I said that I would give way to the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) next.

Julia Goldsworthy: The hon. Gentleman has just been talking about the fact that council tax has doubled since 1997. Does he think that that is entirely down to central Government policy, or is it down to the structural failing of the council tax system?

Robert Neill: That is an interesting point, but I doubt whether most people would agree with the hon. Lady. I note that the former Prime Minister, Mr. Blair, whom Labour Members might remember, stated in 1997 that the council tax system worked well. Unfortunately, it has been broken—perhaps beyond repair—by the policies of the current Government. On the other hand, if the hon. Lady is going to say that the alternative is a local income tax, then, if she will forgive my saying so, she has certainly got the wrong solution to the problem.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that constituencies such as mine—indeed, the whole of Suffolk, Norfolk and Devon—will now, in addition to the fact that they have all lost money in recent years, be faced with the cost of local government reorganisation that they did not ask for, do not want and know will be very expensive?

Robert Neill: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I shall mention that in relation to another topic that I was going to deal with, and make it relevant to the debate.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab) *rose—*

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab) *rose—*

Robert Neill: If the hon. Gentlemen will give me a few moments, I shall finish this point.

The reorganisation is another example, albeit of a different kind, of an unfunded burden. It is a burden that was not sought and that will have an impact on local government finances. No provision has been made for it here, it is not desired, and it is quite extraordinary that it should be pushed through in the dying days of this Government. All I can say to my right hon. Friend is that we will try to protect the residents of those three counties. If there is a change of Government, the Conservatives will take all steps to reverse that decision, even if the present Government have had the temerity to pass it into law and even if such a change requires legislation. Anyone who has spent money on it will find that that is a guaranteed way of losing their money. I hope that the Government will not pursue that entirely ideologically driven and pointless agenda.

Chris Ruane: The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said that there has been a shift of finance from rural to urban areas. Is the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) aware that when his right hon. Friend was the Secretary of State for Wales, he sent £120 million of the block grant from Cardiff to London?

Robert Neill: I have always attempted to be a useful student of history, but there are limits to how far back one can go. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should reflect on this point: if, as has been demonstrated, there has been a shift away from the south-east of England, London and the midlands towards the north, and if his

Government are right in saying that that shift is needs-driven, why have needs increased so much in those areas on this Government's watch?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Robert Neill: I shall give way again in due course, but I should like to make a little more progress first. I know that it is fairly normal for there to be a lot of interventions at the beginning of a debate, but if hon. Members will bear with me, I shall try to fit them in in an orderly fashion.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way regarding Suffolk, Coastal?

Robert Neill: I shall give way purely on Suffolk, Coastal and the reorganisation. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I want to move on, and I think that Mr. Deputy Speaker would not want us to prolong the discussion of local government reorganisation too much.

Richard Younger-Ross: The point that the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) made about wasted money is entirely right. The impact of the reorganisation will be a severe burden on Devon's taxpayers. That reorganisation has been driven partly by a second reorganisation by the boundary committee for England, which is driven by internal Labour party politics rather than anything to do with the electorate. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst ought to take his own advice and get back on track.

Robert Neill: I have heard what my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Cox) has said, and no doubt the House has. I shall move on to the next part of my speech.

I was just observing that there has been a shift not only of funding within England, but of burdens, particularly on to council tax payers. A marked trait under this Government has been a shift of the financial burden away from the Treasury on to the council tax payer. That has been demonstrated conclusively by the amount of local government revenue that has to be raised by council tax, as opposed to the amount that is provided by central Government. That is not just about numbers or bill amounts; it is about the real impact that that has on people and their lives. I have already observed that council tax has doubled on the Labour Government's watch. This settlement means that band D bills will go up this year by a further £23, at a time when inflation is negative. The average bill at that level will come in at £120 a month.

It is sometimes forgotten that the poorest are usually the hardest hit by such changes. For example, the increase in council tax will eat up one third of the increase in the basic state pension. There is lots of evidence from many sources to demonstrate that the level of council tax is one of the key areas of concern for many families, because it has grown exponentially over the years.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love).

Mr. Love: Will the hon. Gentleman explain how it can be that all Labour councils in London are committed to freezing their council tax next year and protecting their public services? How are they able to achieve that?

Robert Neill: Perhaps they have taken a lesson from the excellent Conservative Mayor, who has managed to do the same without the aid of grants skewed in his favour. I give way to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden).

Richard Burden: I want to take the hon. Gentleman back one more time to the question from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) about the alleged shift from rural areas to urban ones. When I talk to Conservatives in Birmingham who are doing something wrong, their normal answer is, "Well, we just don't get enough money." That is an urban area, so is he suggesting that its funding should be cut?

Robert Neill: In due course, I shall deal with the question—*[Interruption.]* It is very interesting that Labour Members have become so used to the politics of the one-liner that they cannot follow an argument that requires more than two paragraphs to develop. In due course, I shall set out precisely how a sensible rebalancing of the local government financing system can be achieved. I am sorry that their crib sheet is not comprehensive enough to deal with the matter.

John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: With respect, I want to make a bit more progress before I give way again.

I think that the Government's track record is a pretty good reason why they did not want a debate on this topic. Their amendment is full of all manner of telephone-number figures, but it bears no resemblance to the reality of the experience of local authorities or their residents. For example, I referred earlier to the amount of expenditure that has to be met from council tax. It has gone up by something like 3 per cent., from 22 per cent. to 25 per cent., on this Government's watch. In money terms, that means that council tax payers are having to raise an extra £14.3 billion. That is a measure of how the burden has shifted away from the Treasury and on to council tax payers, and it makes the figure in the Government's amendment, which boasts about giving an extra £8.6 billion over the period, look pretty sick. It is nowhere enough to compensate for the burden that has been shifted away from the Treasury by the Macavity approach of this Government.

I give way to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin).

John Austin: The hon. Gentleman referred to the Mayor of London. Is he aware that the Mayor has placed the biggest financial increase in fares on the poorest people in London? Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that Bromley, the council for the area that he

[John Austin]

represents, was the one that took the Greater London Council to court over the "Fares Fair" campaign to challenge the idea of a fair fare policy for London?

Robert Neill: I well remember what Bromley did. It was absolutely right to do so, and I make no apology for that because that previous regime did not have a proper approach to fares—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is showing us his freedom pass, and we have made it abundantly clear that that will continue to be protected. It is funded by Conservative-controlled London councils, I might add, so I will not take any lectures from anyone in the party whose previous Minister with responsibility for local government complained that local authorities were not charging enough and were not charging up to the maximum potential. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is on very safe ground to make any more interventions of that kind, if I might respectfully say so.

David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has been trying to get in for some time.

David Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is being most generous. He is pinning an awful lot on the band D council tax level, but that is not a good measure of the impact of council tax in the UK. In my constituency of North-West Leicestershire 75 per cent. of properties are below band D, whereas 60 per cent. of the properties in Bromley, which he partly represents, are band D or above. That must alter the argument that he is making.

On inflation, council tax may have doubled since 1997, but it increased at a greater annual rate in the period when the Conservatives were in government before 1997.

Robert Neill: At least the hon. Gentleman makes a considered intervention, unlike some others, and I have a great deal of respect for his knowledge of local government, but I must beg to differ with him. First, the band D measure is universally accepted as the intellectually and academically approved average. One only has to look at the work of Tony Travers, the well-known independent commentator, who has said that on a number of occasions. Secondly, the use of the band follows common sense, as the other bands are set as percentages in relation to band D, so band D gives the average. It is well established by all respectable public bodies—apart from those who may want to make a point of their own—that that is the best means of comparing like with like. I am sorry to have to disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but I am afraid that he is wrong on this one.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I shall make a little more progress, if I may, but I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

We have seen the burden that has been placed on the council tax payer. We have seen a transfer of burdens to council tax payers within local authorities, but we have also seen a shift of regulatory burdens and costs on to local authorities. The doctrine of the "unfully funded obligation" is the reality, if not the wording, of Government policy. Many local authorities will have experienced that in relation to concessionary fares, for example, for which the burden was not picked up in full. Free swimming is another example: superficially attractive on the surface but, on further examination, not fully funded.

The problem is particularly evident in this year's local government funding settlement, which refers specifically to the availability of free personal care for adults. Free personal care is another concept worthy of debate, but the funding figures are as follows. The estimation is that it will cost £670 million in a full year: £420 million is covered by the area base grant, as set out in the funding settlement, which assumes that the remaining £250 million will be found from local government efficiencies.

What it does not say, however, is that the Government have already increased to 4 per cent. the target for the efficiencies required of local authorities. The Local Government Association has pointed that out to Ministers, so I hope that the Minister responding to the debate will say clearly whether that £250 million is part of the 4 per cent. in efficiency savings being demanded. If it is in addition to those savings, how is that to be achieved?

The document before us is silent on that. If the £250 million is in addition to the 4 per cent. savings, how do the Government reconcile that with their policy on new burdens, which suggests that there should be funding for those new burdens? We need absolute clarity on that. Despite requests since the LGA issued its statement, that clarity has not yet been received.

So, we have seen transfers of burdens across a raft of areas, but that is not the end of the problem with the settlement. I referred half in jest to the nature of the document, and the complication of it. I am glad to say that it is generally accepted that the one person in the country who understands it is in the Chamber, but he is in the Box and cannot talk to us about it. However, it really is that complex and difficult to follow and that creates the real difficulty that there is a growing lack of trust in the local government world and among ordinary residents about the reliability of the criteria on which distribution takes place. One has only to look at some of the figures in the document for individual authorities to see differences that on the face of it are not readily recognisable, or attributable to an evidence base.

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Robert Neill: I will give way on that point.

Mark Hunter: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has been very generous with his time.

The hon. Gentleman is talking about trust in the Government's figures. Does he agree that part of the problem is that the Government are not delivering to local authorities what their own funding formula indicates that they should? He is quite right to say that anger is building up around the country, and a large part of that is because authorities such as my own in Stockport are being consistently short changed, and are consistently not receiving what the Government's own formula says that they are entitled to. Is it any wonder that there is a complete lack of confidence in the system?

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman makes an entirely fair point. I have only to look at the circumstances of my outer-London borough, which has many pockets of deprivation but is on the floor again for the seventh or eighth year running. When we see that fully two thirds of all London boroughs—of any kind—have ended up on the floor, we wonder about the reliability of the calculations that gave rise to that situation.

Although the floor system worked in the past, it has stretched many local authorities to such an extent that the gearing, particularly in shire districts, places very high burdens on them. The floor for a shire district is set at 0.5 per cent. Such districts are far more dependent than most local authorities on investment income, which has now fallen to about 0.5 per cent. so as their floor funding is limited to the same figure, the gearing effect means that their council tax rise is much more significant than in any other part of the country. Shire areas are significantly disadvantaged by the operation of the formula system.

Julia Goldsworthy: The hon. Gentleman has been talking about floors and ceilings. He will be aware that many councils near the ceiling are a long way from their targets and are already experiencing massive pressures on the provision of services. Does he have proposals to get rid of floors and ceilings, or to replace them with something entirely different? Some information would be helpful.

Robert Neill: Actually we do. I shall come to our proposals if the hon. Lady will bear with me. I was about to turn to missed opportunities and the things that a sensible settlement could and should be doing to deal with those issues.

Having set out the inadequacies of the system and put them in a broader context, I want to make a final point before I move to the next stage of the argument—what should be in the settlement but is not. The problem is that there are deficiencies not only in the settlement but in the methodology for formula distribution, as has been mentioned. The inadequacy of the population data—a point raised frequently by Members on both sides of the House—has perverse impacts, but the system is also wrapped up in the policy of micro-management and bureaucratic control that has become characteristic of the Government. All recent attempts to suggest otherwise are belied by the facts.

Table 2, attached to the settlement document, sets out no fewer than 39 separate ring-fenced grants. The number of national indicator sets in the comprehensive area assessment regime was originally badged up as a mere 196, but the Government were forced to accept that when the sets are split—which they are obliged to do—between heads and blocks, the number is about 290. Is there any serious attempt to deal with that? No, sadly there is not.

I hoped that the settlement would take a leaf from the good work of the Local Government Association—an all-party body. Its document, "Delivering more for less", demonstrates practical and worked-through means of saving £4.5 billion. Efficiencies could be achieved without damaging front-line activity, and the document sets out specific examples. It goes further. The LGA has come up with 13 local authorities that are prepared to act as pilots. Do I see recognition of that in the Government's settlement? No. Do I see any movement to reflect the fact that, for example, in Leicestershire and Leicester, in a Total Place arrangement involving the city and the county—exactly the collaborative model that should be encouraged—more than 3,000 performance data sets, reports or evaluations have to be processed? Is there any reflection of the fact that the average number of documents that has to be passed through by most local area agreements runs into thousands?

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about efficiencies without damage to front-line services. May I refer him to Conservative-controlled Warwickshire county council, which is currently advocating the closure of seven fire stations and the sacking of 100 firefighters? Does he see that as an example of Conservative efficiency without damaging front-line services?

Robert Neill: Warwickshire county council is consulting on those measures as options following the serving of an improvement notice from the Government. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not mean that it is impossible ever to find efficiency savings. If he believed that, he could not support his Government's document, "Smarter Government", which was published only a few days ago. The test is always to try to find sensible efficiency savings, and I point out to him that the Government have a very good example in front of them. The National Audit Office—generally recognised as an independent and reliable body—cited £2 billion in 2006 prices as the cost of administering the inspection and control regime imposed by central Government. PricewaterhouseCoopers, which is a little more conservative, put the upward reporting costs for councils—not even the administration of the regime, just upward reporting—at £1.8 million per authority. That is precisely one of the things that can and should be stripped out. Not only is it a waste of money, but it also skews the behaviour of local authorities, as we have all seen. They are sometimes almost forced to play tick the box to meet the formula requirements, reporting upwards to the Government rather than downwards to their electors, who ought to be driving priorities.

Mr. Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only is the reporting burden immense and over-cumbersome, but so too is the inspection regime? I am informed that Devonshire county council has to devote almost permanent employee time solely to the inspection regime under which it labours.

Robert Neill: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. I saw that system in its early days when I was still in local government. I still talk to colleagues in local government. Inspection has become an industry in itself, and the complexity of the regime and the burden it imposes, in terms of direct costs, officer time and the shifting of priorities, is wholly disproportionate to the level of risk involved. It breaches the fundamental rule that any inspection regime should be simple, sensible and rational.

There is nothing in the settlement to deal with issues that could sensibly have been dealt with, which is a major disappointment. The Government seek to get around things by quoting figures, but as I demonstrated, the impact of their figures is not borne out or supported by experience on the ground.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves away from the "more for less" report, does he agree that one of the great difficulties faced at present by upper-tier authorities in particular is that they have already calculated how they can make efficiency savings and have made the hard decisions, so the imposition of further efficiency savings—for example, for social care costs—are a particularly unwelcome burden because they come out of cycle?

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is completely right. That is why it is a serious dereliction on the part of the Government not to have given the explanations that the LGA has been asking for. Given that the announcement came out on 26 November, it would not have been too difficult to produce the figures. Not to do so is a serious breach of the Government's own rule on new burdens and I fear that it indicates where their heart lies—to shift the burden on to local authorities for the sake of convenience.

I shall now consider what could and should be done in the local settlement. We are all agreed about one thing—that the three-year settlement regime is sensible and one that we hope continues for the future—but it is the only thing the Government got right. The rest does not stack up.

Lack of clarity undermines the credibility of the document. It does not deal with proper reform of the local government system, which is what is actually needed. Proper reform should take a number of steps. The first, most important step that the Government should take at a time when the country is in recession is to assist council tax payers—the hard-pressed families who are already suffering. A sensible local government settlement would have put in place mechanisms to support local authorities in freezing council tax, so that council tax payers did not suffer the burden that they are suffering as the country comes out of recession. The Government are not doing that. Another one, I hope, will be in a position before long to do so.

Secondly, longer-term reform of the methodology is necessary. In this day and age, it is quite inexcusable to use population data that are so out of date, and there should be a swift move to the use of updated data. Several local authorities have made a compelling case for having been significantly disadvantaged by the situation.

Thirdly, it is necessary to bring back a measure of independence to the evidence base for the distribution criteria, and that is why my party has always proposed an independent body. I hope that others will support us. We suggested the Audit Commission, but the body could be the National Audit Office. In any case, the body should be independent and tasked with evaluating on an evidential basis—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State laughs, but it works perfectly well in Australia. It seems to work very effectively. *[Interruption.]* I shall come back to him and his quangos in a moment if he wants to go down that route. That system works in Australia, and it provides an evidence base. The body would be tasked with reporting to Parliament, so that this House could properly debate the distribution criteria. There would be a debate about the criteria, and it would be separate from the political decision that Ministers make about the size of the pot that will be distributed. That long-term institutional change would, if properly dealt with, restore some credibility to an unbalanced system.

I have referred to Australia being able to perform that task and this Government not being able to. I should have made the point that the council tax freeze is perfectly practical and deliverable, because it happens in Scotland. If it is good enough for Scotland, it should be good enough for England; if it is deliverable in Scotland, it should be deliverable in England. What is lacking is not the methodology, but simply the political will to do that.

There should also be significant long-term reform to encourage local authorities to grow their tax base, because that has been completely lacking. That is why the Opposition have proposed that local authorities be able to keep the proceeds of growth by keeping the council tax that new development in their area generates. It is why we have proposed that they also be able to keep the growth in national non-domestic rates—business rates—that is generated by new commercial development. That would give them a stake once more in growing their tax base. Not only have the Government failed to take up any of those ideas, they strangled at birth the local authority business growth incentives—LABGI—scheme, which although small was at least a step in the right direction. They killed off any attempt to provide an incentive. In fact, the real argument, as all the evidence makes out, is that we should go much further and allow local authorities to keep all proceeds.

The Government have failed to give local authorities the freedom to raise funding by going to the market for, for example, bond finance. The Government have failed to give them the opportunity to set their own targets, and instead imposed them from above.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that broadening the revenue base has several risks? My local authority, Westminster, has been heavily dependent on parking income; indeed, it has the largest parking income of any authority in the country. As soon as difficulties hit the authority and parking income started to fall, we found a £20 million hole, and that has led to a large number of redundancies and cuts in services. Does he understand that such reliance on other sources of money is fraught with risk?

Robert Neill: I am sorry, but I do not think that the hon. Lady understands the concept, because broadening the base by enabling local authorities to retain the additional national business rate would spread the risk, rather than increase their reliance on it. If we were to broaden the tax base, we would be less dependent on any individual income stream. That is the reverse of her proposition.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman started to talk about allowing local authorities to borrow. Does he agree with the prudential borrowing rules that the Government introduced? They enabled local authorities to purchase capital assets from which they are receiving income streams through rent and other uses.

Robert Neill: I want to be helpful to the hon. Lady, and, like LABGI, that scheme was a small step in the right direction, but, unlike LABGI, it has not been killed at birth. However, the scheme to which she refers is too limited. Why do we not go down the route that most other advanced democracies have taken and introduce

a proper arrangement that enables local authorities to go for bonds? If I were to follow through the logic of her argument, I should hope that she might support us.

At the end of the day, the local government finance document is less than satisfactory. It is less than satisfactory in its presentation—

Richard Younger-Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I am sorry, but I have done my best. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will get the chance to speak in the debate in due course.

The document is unsatisfactory. It reflects an unsatisfactory settlement; it reflects, therefore, a Government who lack the will to tackle the serious issues of local government finance; and, above all, it reflects a Government who do not recognise the burden that that unsatisfactory arrangement places upon ordinary families and ordinary council tax payers. I do not know which is the greater indictment: the inability to recognise the harm that is being done, or the lack of will to do something about it. If we put it together, we find, as I would have said in my previous life, that the Government are bang to rights on all counts.

7.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. John Denham): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

'congratulates the Government on introducing the first ever three year settlement for local government which will have provided an additional £8.6 billion for local government over three years, and continues to build upon the 39 per cent. real terms increase in funding provided to local government over the first 10 years of this Government; welcomes the four per cent. increase proposed for next year which, given the current level of inflation, would be the 13th straight year of above inflation increases; recognises the immense help this will give to local authorities throughout the country in dealing with difficult economic circumstances resulting from the global downturn; anticipates the lowest council tax increase for 16 years; rejects the calls from Her Majesty's Opposition to cut the Department for Communities and Local Government's budget by over £1 billion, which would lead either to cuts in local services or an increase in council tax bills of one per cent. to pay for the missing millions; and further welcomes the Government's Green Paper, Shaping the Future of Care Together, which sets out its vision to reform the adult care and support system in England."

That was a very long speech. There is not a lot else to be said about it, but it was a very long speech. As my hon. Friends will have noticed, I am no Denis Healey and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) is no Geoffrey Howe, but I have a sense of how Denis Healey felt when he thought he had been savaged by a dead sheep.

I am grateful for the chance to reply to this debate. I have my notes that I prepared earlier, and they say:

"Sorry to see the Hon Member for Meriden not here to lead the debate."

I have now to say that the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) is here but is not leading the debate, and that is a surprise because the hon. Lady has, after all, been complaining that Parliament has not debated these issues.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is aware of the convention, through the usual channels, that each party is notified about who will speak in the debate. We understood that the Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination would do so for the Government. That is what our Whips Office was notified of, and therefore, in keeping with the convention, I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), in whom I have the utmost confidence, to lead the debate.

Mr. Denham: I assure the hon. Lady that it was always my intention to lead for the Government, because she complained that Parliament has not been debating these issues. She twice applied for urgent questions, and, although it is not for me to comment, in my humble opinion I think Mr. Speaker was right to decline. Now she has had the chance to lead the debate and she has not done so.

I shall turn to the background to the debate, on which the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst spent 10 minutes at the beginning of his speech. Following the low level of participation in last year's debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), wrote on 12 November to the hon. Member for Meriden, who speaks for the Opposition, and to the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, saying that we intended to lay a written ministerial statement. The hon. Member for Meriden did not reply, but had she answered the letter and said, "I think there should be a statement," we would have made an oral statement. However, she did not.

The hon. Lady is not that good at correspondence. My right hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Hazel Blears), my predecessor as Secretary of State, wrote to her on 21 January, asking her to explain the proposals by the Leader of the Opposition to cut the Department's budget, when he said that he would restrict the budget to a 1 per cent. increase in real terms. Strangely, the hon. Lady did not reply to that letter, either.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I must set the record straight, as I really do object to the House's being misled. The Leader of the House said during business questions that there had been "discussions" between those on the Front Benches about not having a written ministerial statement. I said in response that I had not seen a letter from the Department regarding having only a written ministerial statement. The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) had not seen a letter either. However, a letter does not constitute "discussions".

Mr. Denham: It is clearly the case that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary wrote to the hon. Member for Meriden on 12 November—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I say to those on both Front Benches that I think we have now dealt at sufficient length with how we have arrived at where we are this evening; perhaps we could get on with the topic before the House.

Mr. Denham: I am delighted to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, noting that we still do not know how the hon. Member for Meriden thinks that cuts should be applied to my Department's budget this year.

The reason the settlement was not controversial last year—nor indeed, in practice, this year—is that it was a good settlement. For the first time in this spending review period, the Government set out to give local authorities the certainty of a three-year settlement. Indeed, having spent most of his speech talking about changes that should have been made to the coming year, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst ended up saying that a three-year settlement was a good idea. One cannot have a three-year settlement and then change it in the second or third year. The three-year settlement involves an £8.6 billion increase over three years—an average annual increase of 4 per cent. This Labour Government have delivered on that commitment year after year so that local government has had increased funding, reduced targets, less ring-fencing, and more influence over more resources, including for 16-to-19 education, English for speakers of other languages, and informal adult learning.

Moreover, this has not been happening just over the past few years. Over the first 10 years of this Labour Government, local government funding has increased by 39 per cent. in real terms.

Mr. Redwood *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who will no doubt explain why in the last four years of the previous Conservative Government real-terms funding was cut by 7 per cent.

Mr. Redwood: Will the Secretary of State tell us why the Government will not use up-to-date population figures, which would be much fairer for areas with fast growth?

Mr. Denham: Indeed I will. I notice, however, that the right hon. Gentleman did not explain why there is a such a sharp contrast between the 7 per cent. real-terms cut last time the Conservatives had their fingers on power over local government and the 39 per cent. increase in real-terms funding under this Labour Government. That difference is important.

Julia Goldsworthy: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Denham: Let me first deal with the right hon. Gentleman's point about population, as I was going to come to that aspect.

At the end of his speech, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst welcomed a three-year settlement. Part and parcel of having a three-year settlement was not to chop and change underlying data in the course of the three years. But of course the Government have recognised the importance of population issues, particularly at times of rapid population change. That is why, just a few days ago, at the request of Ministers, the Office for National Statistics produced a consultation document suggesting how population changes could be taken into account in future. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman apparently had no knowledge of that taking place, as it is very important. It stems directly from the fact that Ministers recognised the issue and set in train the right processes, but, quite properly, stuck to the three-year settlement as local government wanted us to do. Although some councils would gain from a change and others would lose, they wanted a three-year settlement. We have produced the evidence—or rather, the ONS has, because that is its job—and that means that in future the council tax system can be more flexible and responsive.

We believe that this settlement means that in the coming year band D council tax increases will be the lowest for 16 years. The increase at band D was 3 per cent. this year, and I see no reason why it should not be lower in the coming year. In fact, measured by average household bills, last year's council tax increase was already the lowest ever.

Let me address some of the points made in the debate so far. The Opposition have focused on the claimed cost of band D council tax. We ourselves use band D in announcements, as I just did, but perhaps the Opposition should have recognised more publicly that most people—two thirds, in fact—pay not at band D but at bands A, B and C; only 9 per cent. of properties are in the top three bands. However, even if we do focus on band D rates, we find that Conservative councils increased council tax for this year by more than Labour councils. The average increase for band D under the Conservatives was 3.3 per cent., whereas Labour councils kept rises to 2.8 per cent. on average. I would say that to grab a headline, the Opposition have at the very least deliberately overstated their case and not presented the arguments in the way that would be true for the great majority of people.

Let us look into this further. The official Opposition recently published data that they claimed showed the council tax burden doubling, but which were the councils pushing up council tax take? Why, out of the top 50, according to the information revealed by the official Opposition, 30 were Conservative-controlled and only five were controlled by the Labour party. On average, council tax in Labour areas is lower than in Conservative areas, and we can all see why. That is why Labour Hackney has frozen council tax for four years while improving and protecting front-line services, and it is why all eight London Labour councils have promised a council tax freeze for the coming year.

Under Labour, with active support from the Government, local government has become more efficient. Today I confirmed that local councils are on track to have made more than £3 billion in savings by March 2010—savings that they have been able to put back into front-line services. It is because local government has demonstrated its ability to save and reinvest that I am confident that local government can meet its share of providing free adult social care for those in greatest need. We should not forget that in a full year, local government will receive more than £400 million in new resources—the largest transfer of resources from the NHS to local government since the NHS was formed in 1948. I think local government knows that this is an opportunity and a challenge—the challenge of showing that local government can deliver consistently good services across the country.

Robert Neill: Will the Secretary of State now answer the specific point that I raised with him in this context: is the £250 million in efficiency savings that is assumed to come from local government part of the 4 per cent. target demanded, or in addition to it?

Mr. Denham: We believe that in the coming year local government can make the additional savings that are needed, which total less than £250 million. Obviously

for future years there has not yet been a comprehensive spending review, so we do not know the overall settlement for those years. However, I believe that local government can meet that target. I also believe that local government welcomes the commitment that has been made in the current proposals to the development of adult social care in its areas.

Richard Burden: If local government is to save and reinvest in the way that my right hon. Friend says, is it not important that at a local authority level there is absolute transparency and straightness with local populations about what is going on? Does he share my concern about Birmingham city council, where apparently thousands of pounds are being taken from local budgets, including in my own constituency—£55,000 in 2007-08, £69,000 in 2008-09 and £241,000 in 2009-10? That is apparently in order to make efficiency savings that will be reinvested, but it is the devil's own job to find out exactly where they are being reinvested other than to finance rather dubious city council reorganisation. Does he agree that authorities such as Birmingham need to be a lot more transparent with the people they are meant to serve?

Mr. Denham: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that local authorities need to be absolutely transparent in their budgeting and in the way that they use resources. As he will know, a few weeks ago we had occasion to raise some concerns with Birmingham city council about the use of working neighbourhoods fund money. That came to light because a local strategic partnership had published minutes showing concerns that the money was not being used. In that particular case, we had no desire to punish the people of Birmingham for their council's actions, so when we recently announced additional working neighbourhoods fund money we included Birmingham in that. It is important that this money is used effectively on behalf of the people of that city. Similarly, if local authorities are making changes to their budgeting arrangements, they should be open and people should know exactly what is happening.

Barry Gardiner (Brent, North) (Lab): On that point about transparency, what does my right hon. Friend think about a council that made a commitment before the last local elections that there would be absolutely no increase in council tax over the coming period—one of the parties in the coalition said that it would reduce it—and yet has increased it year on year for the past three years? That is Brent council. Does he not think it a disgrace that the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather) is not in the Chamber to defend her party?

Mr. Denham: I certainly understand my hon. Friend's concern about promises made and broken, which nobody likes to see.

I wish to say a little about the Opposition's figures. I believe the House will agree that every word from the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst suggested or implied that councils should have had more funding from this Government. He certainly made many references to councils that he felt were not getting enough, and he made no proposals that councils should have their funding reduced, so the only conclusion I can draw is that he thinks councils should have had more money. However, as we pointed out earlier this year, the Opposition's official policy is that my Department should have had its funding cut by £1 billion this year.

Mrs. Spelman *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Denham: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but if she cares to dig out the letter from my predecessor—I can send her another copy—I will be pleased to receive her reply explaining what the Leader of the Opposition meant when he said that growth in my Department's budget would be limited to 1 per cent. We have never received a reply. The implication of the Leader of the Opposition's policy is that my Department's funding would have been cut, not next year, not the year after but this year, by £1 billion. Compared with the current funding, including our housing pledge, Conservative policy would mean a £1.8 billion cut in its funding. We have never had an explanation of where those cuts would come or of by how much council tax would have to go up.

Mark Hunter: On the subject of budgets being cut and promises broken, can the Secretary of State explain why, despite the Government's claim to have made a fair settlement for local government this year, many local authorities, including Stockport, which covers my constituency, are receiving less in central Government grant than the amounts indicated in the Government's own funding formula? How can that be fair, and why are people such as my constituents still being short-changed by this Government?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman knows enough about the system to recognise that under a funding formula, at any one time some authorities are above the strict position in the formula and others below it. Because convergence is difficult and cannot be achieved overnight, there is always a process of floors and transitional arrangements. In any system that is ever devised, some people will be able to say, "This year in my authority we are away from the funding floor," but that does not mean we should not set up the system to make progress in the right direction every year. If one looks at the variations in the formula grant for different local authorities this year, last year and the year before, one can see progress in the right direction.

Mark Hunter: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Denham: No, I must make some progress, or I will speak for as long as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, and then I will be embarrassed having made comments about the length of his remarks.

The Opposition have said that they would pay councils to have a council tax freeze, but that adds another £1.3 billion a year to promises that they cannot possibly afford to carry through. No one can really believe that there is any credibility in what they are saying. The truth is that Conservative councillors and MPs up and down the country are saying that they want more money for their area, while they are all campaigning for a Conservative Government who promise to give them less. It is time that the Opposition were open and straightforward about their plans, which are pretty bad.

John Austin: On that point, I have here a publication from the Bexley Conservatives. In claiming the credits of their council, it points to two new academies built, four schools rebuilt and nine new children's centres, all achieved by the wonderful Bexley Conservative council. How does the Secretary of State contrast that with their spending plans if we were to have the misfortune of a Conservative Government?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Material of that sort, financed from Belize or wherever else, is dropping through letterboxes all over the country. There is a serious point at issue, because the 39 per cent. increase in real funding for local government achieved under the Labour party has made a huge difference to the quality of local services and the development of services such as Sure Start and Building Schools for the Future. That is jeopardised by the promises of the Conservatives.

Not only have the Opposition made clear that they would cut council spending now, but they would scrap house building, because they could not match our housing pledge just when that money is helping the country through the recession. They would impose top-down cuts on front-line services, as their shadow Chief Secretary has said in two interviews, and they would abolish regional development agencies and regional economic support, a policy opposed by the CBI. Fears on that front were not lessened when the hon. Member for Meriden personally intervened last summer to try to halt economic recovery by instructing Tory councils not to co-operate with making land available for growth, housing and jobs. They would do away with all entitlements to decent public services and make the postcode lottery the defining principle of a Tory Government.

In Southampton, Conservatives say that they will privatise, not for the good of the public but for ideological reasons. In Hammersmith, they say that tenants should lose security of tenure so that they can be evicted when the council no longer thinks they need a home and says they are hard to get rid of. In Barnet, we are promised a Ryanair council—presumably one that offers only the most basic standard of service, full of extra costs and hidden charges, and which everyone has to pay twice, once in council tax and once in charges just to get a decent service. The truth is that the future of local services is bleak under the Conservatives. They say that Conservative councils show what a Conservative Government would be like, and I agree. It is a fair warning.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): The proof of the pudding is in the eating. What would the Secretary of State say to a council that is a net gainer from concessionary travel and pockets the difference, depriving pensioners, refuses to give free swimming to under-16s and closes cash offices? Its deputy leader, when asked whether it had consulted, said, "Why consult when the answer would be no?" That is how much it cares. It has cut sports development officers, all the while having £22 million or £23 million in the bank—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I think the Secretary of State has got the message from the hon. Lady.

Mr. Denham: I get the gist, but I must tell my hon. Friend that there was a streak of honesty from the Conservative leader of the council who said that it was not worth consulting if nothing was to be agreed. That is refreshing compared with what we have heard this evening, but I agree with her.

On concessionary fares, which I was going to come to later, this Government have introduced free bus travel for pensioners, which is a great breakthrough. There are two truths behind that. First, all the evidence is that the funding nationally is the right amount for the concessionary fare scheme. Secondly, it is also the case—this was acknowledged by the Department for Transport just a few weeks ago—that we needed to make some changes to the distribution of funding, because as the system came in, we could see that some areas were gainers and some were losers. That was the right thing to do. I do not believe that there would be free bus travel for pensioners under the Conservatives. Even if adjustments in the formula have been proposed for the future, that reallocation was the right thing to do.

As for a local authority that takes the benefit of that and does not plough it back in—that is a real shame. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said that free swimming was not fully funded, but there was a deal for local authorities. Labour councils thought, "That is a good deal for our people, so we'll have free swimming," and Conservatives councils turned round and said, "We're not going to do it." There is a difference between the parties. The offer was the same to both: the Conservatives said no in place after place, and the Labour councils said yes. That is the difference.

Mr. Cox: What would the Secretary of State say to the 92-year-old lady who knocked on the door of No. 10 Downing street yesterday in tears because her wardens had been removed from her sheltered housing, and the hundreds who walked from Trafalgar square to Downing street who are also finding, in all councils around the country, a relentless cut in the social services for the disabled and the elderly, presided over by this Government, because of an unfair funding system?

Mr. Denham: I would never make light of the position of a 92-year-old woman who was worried about her personal circumstances, but my understanding is that that demonstration was from Conservative-controlled Barnet council.

Mr. Cox: Wrong! They came from all round the country.

Mr. Denham: Perhaps it was not, but those I saw were from Barnet. It is right that local authorities make the best use of support. Some have chosen to remove warden support and others have found other ways of providing appropriate support for local people. I would expect any local authority to make the right decisions to provide the appropriate levels of support for the elderly people whose care they have assumed.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State think that local authorities would do better to spend some of their funds on the services that have just been mentioned, rather than on unjustified and excessive salaries for many of their senior officers, who do not even treat the public with civility?

Mr. Denham: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have been very pleased by the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister yesterday, which echoed and added to what I said at my party's conference. The people at the top of local government often have a lifetime of public service behind them—they are not bad people—but things have got out of hand, and we need to deal with that.

Mrs. Humble: The Secretary of State mentioned a moment ago the key role of RDAs and the threat that they are under from the Conservatives. What would be the effect on Blackpool if the Northwest Regional Development Agency were scrapped? The RDA has identified the needs of Blackpool and the need for regeneration, and it has invested in the town.

Mr. Denham: The reality is that if RDA funding and RDAs were removed, the remaining funding—funding that was not simply cut to fund inheritance tax for wealthy families—would just be distributed on a formula basis. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend who has worked so hard for her constituency. Blackpool is coping with huge economic and social changes, and changes in the tourist market, which needs concentrated, focused effort, on behalf not just of the town, but of the whole region. The problem is that there would be no mechanism for providing that without RDAs. The money would either have to come from central Government, or it would be completely dissipated. That would be a disaster, which is why so many people, including house builders, and those in the CBI and chambers of commerce, are so alarmed by the Conservatives' irresponsible proposals.

On grant distribution, we are told that money is being taken from the south and the midlands to go somewhere else. The fact is that the two largest gainers from grant distribution were the east midlands and the south-west, hard though that is to fit with the idea that money is being taken away from the midlands or rural areas. Two of the largest increases in the formula grant of any authorities in the country were in Dorset, at 7.1 per cent., and Somerset, at 5.5 per cent. That is hardly evidence that resources are being shifted from the south or from rural areas.

The truth is that the Government work as hard as we can to produce an objective basis for formula grant. It is widely discussed and widely debatable, and I do not see why the debate should not continue, but the argument that the system has been in some way manipulated just does not stand up to the fact of where the increases in the allocations that we are discussing are going in the coming year.

I have criticised the Conservatives, but I do not rest my case on that criticism or on our record of investment and support for local government. The truth is that we place local government at the heart of meeting the challenges that face this country. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst talked of Total Place as though it was something that would come as a surprise to Government, rather than being an initiative that was launched in the Budget last year by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for the Exchequer. The 13 pilot projects to which the hon. Gentleman referred were set up with local authorities and other public services by the Government, and they report to a ministerial Committee that I chair.

I am pleased that there are 70 or more places doing the same thing as Total Place, because it shows that we are going in the right direction and that the public services can be further improved and made more efficient if we can look at all the public service spending in one area. Yesterday's "Smarter Government" paper set out a series of new flexibilities for local government to support that role—easier pooling of budgets, fewer targets, better organised inspections, a reduction of £100 million in the compliance costs for local authorities, single capital budgets and reducing the number of funding streams. These are developments for the future—

Robert Neill: It won't be your Government who do it!

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman may come unstuck with his cockiness about that. On this issue and on many others, the values and policies of my party are much closer to what the people of this country want. Before he gets carried away with himself, I remind him that the election is yet to be held and we are determined that what we think are the right policies for this country will win out—and my right hon. and hon. Friends agree.

Yesterday's paper promised a transformation in the amount of data about local services, costs and quality available on the web in a form that enables the public to scrutinise, to compare and to propose better ways of running services. Money will be tight, so we back a rebirth of municipal enterprise and the expansion of trading to generate new streams of income. All this is backed up by our commitment to give councils the powers that they need to scrutinise effectively public service spending in their area.

I am pleased that we have had this debate, because it has enabled us to set out clearly that we have had another good settlement for local government. It is a settlement that will lead to the lowest council tax increases for 16 years at least, and to the protection and improvement of public services. The debate has shown the Conservatives as having no policies and no views on how to protect public services for local people, whereas the Government believe in local government, work with it and support it.

8.28 pm

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): It is useful to have this debate in the absence of the Government providing us with time to discuss this year's local government settlement. Although I was not expecting it to be so bad-tempered on the part of the Secretary of State, I did know that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) is always good value on this subject.

I am not sure that the Secretary of State's remarks can be squared with the fact that we were not to debate this subject. He has just said that local government is at the heart of government, but his Department did not deem a debate necessary. In the debate on the settlement last year, some important points were raised. We talked about the expected average council tax increases and the delivery of efficiency savings. We still have questions outstanding about resources invested in Icelandic banks, as councils still do not know when they will get those back. We also debated the impact on councils of falling incomes from charges. All those issues are still relevant today, as are the issues that hon. Members have raised about the impact of the current formula on their local authority. I cannot see any reason why a debate this year would not have been as valid as the one a year ago. If the Government really do have local government at the heart of everything that they believe in, why did we not have this debate in Government time and why was local government not mentioned at all in the Queen's Speech?

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady mentions charges. Can she explain why her Liberal Democrat colleagues on Brent council raised charges for elderly care by 300 per cent. at the same time as they broke their promise not to increase the council tax? Those are the issues about charges that concern my constituents in Brent.

Julia Goldsworthy: And they are exactly the kind of issues raised in last year's debate about the funding formula, so I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's contribution on how he thinks the current funding arrangements are impacting on Brent. Hon. Members would be grateful to hear about that.

Barry Gardiner *rose—*

Julia Goldsworthy: I want to make some progress. The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to make a speech.

The Secretary of State said that we do not need to have a debate every year because we have had a three-year funding settlement. There is a consensus that long-term funding settlements are a good thing because they allow for better planning. However, the fact that we have a spending review every three years does not mean that we do not have a Budget every year. I cannot understand the logic.

To be fair, the Conservatives' motion contains several valid observations about matters such as the increasing unaffordability of council tax and the extent of the above-inflation rises that we have seen every year for the past 10 years. The comparison with the increases in the state pension is also valid, although it was the Conservatives who removed the link with earnings, which has made the problem 10 times worse. There are also valid observations about some of the spending pressures on councils, and the motion refers to one of them—the recent announcement on social care.

Other policies, however, such as concessionary bus fares, have already impacted on local councils. Regardless of what the Secretary of State says, as one who represents an area that gets a large number of visitors every year, I know that the costs for local government are not equivalent to the amount of money received. The cost pressures within Cornwall are different as well. If he says that the policy is fully funded, he should take another look at the evidence, because, as far as I can see, that policy represents a massive additional cost for several councils, which they struggle to meet.

The same can be said of the cost of meeting swimming targets, which are a difficult burden to manage, particularly in areas that are popular tourist destinations. Many of those areas are rural areas and a long way from their targets. The Secretary of State said that some of the biggest increases are in the south-west, but I would imagine that that is because those areas are the furthest from their targets and have the greatest distance to travel to reach them. That means that they are scraping along the bottom trying to reach the per-head funding that the Government say they should receive.

Mrs. Humble: I, too, represent a popular tourist destination. Is the hon. Lady aware that the Government negotiated the original formula for distributing the money for the pensioners pass with the Local Government Association? All the councils deemed it to be fair. Particular pressures have been identified in areas such as hers and mine, so the Government have produced a consultation document on redirecting money from councils making a profit to those making a loss. Does she welcome that?

Julia Goldsworthy: I will welcome it if I hear from my council that all its additional costs will be covered, but previous experience makes its cynicism understandable.

It is not clear to me from the Conservative motion and the comments of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst what the causes of the problems are. Are they simply a consequence of Government policy, or are they fundamental problems inherent in the structure of the local government finance system created under the Conservative Administration?

Mr. Redwood: Is it the hon. Lady's party's intention to introduce the 1 per cent. levy on higher priced homes every year? Who would be responsible for the valuation of the properties and who would pay that bill?

Julia Goldsworthy: As my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) has made clear, we are talking about a national tax of 1 per cent. of the value of properties over £2 million, which will be put in place until measures can be fully implemented to replace the system of council tax with a local income tax.

Mr. Redwood: Every year?

Julia Goldsworthy: Yes, it would be an annual tax. We are quite clear that the current taxation system is unfair, but rather than simply making observations about the fact that it is unfair, we have sat down and tried to come up with a package of policies to make the whole tax system fairer, not just locally but nationally.

Essentially, what we see in the Conservative motion is some interesting observations, albeit ones that are self-evident. However, I am not sure that we have had any analysis of what the problems are or what the alternative is. We have heard a lot about Total Place and the "Deliverying more for less" document and the savings that they can deliver. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, "More for Less" is a document produced with cross-party agreement, but some of the conclusions that can be drawn from it are interesting. The implications of the report are that ring-fencing needs to be reduced to help delivery and that all local public service delivery agents need to sit round the table and to have the money at that table. However, the implication of that is un-ring-fencing things that are not just part of local government finance, and I have heard nothing, either from the Conservatives or from the Government, about whether they are prepared to go that far.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about growing the tax base. Putting that proposal in the context of my constituency, as far as I can see it means that councils will receive more money for building more expensive houses in the areas affected. However, given the current gap between income and house prices in Cornwall, all I can see is that instead of central Government targets driving probably inappropriate development in some communities, financial pressures on councils will drive forward such development. Instead of responding to housing need, we will have centrally driven targets replaced by developers' greed. I am slightly concerned about that.

Robert Neill: I wonder whether the hon. Lady missed the observation made by my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), who speaks for our party on such matters, which was that, precisely to deal with the issue of affordability, our scheme would fund affordable homes at 125 per cent. of council tax to give an incentive for such homes.

Julia Goldsworthy: If the hon. Gentleman does the sums, he will find that the more lucrative properties will still be the very large ones, not the smaller affordable homes—even the incentivised ones.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): In anticipating what my hon. Friend might say in response to what the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said about how the money raised by the incentivised scheme would go towards developing affordable housing, I thought that he had already argued that it would go to the council to be used to provide services generally, so that money will be spent twice.

Julia Goldsworthy: I am not entirely clear what the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was saying, which further underlines the point that I am trying to make. I am not exactly clear what the Conservatives are proposing. I asked him what his plans were for floors and ceilings, given how unfair he felt the current formula was, but I am not entirely sure that I got an answer on what he would do. The implication of his comments was that councils are getting a raw deal because they are not being funded better by central Government, so presumably he is suggesting that we need better funding from central Government. That means centralising more of what local government spends, whereas I would have imagined that a genuinely localist party would be coming forward with proposals for more to be raised and spent locally.

Mark Hunter: Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite the Government introducing needs-based formula funding, too many authorities—I have mentioned Stockport already, but it is only one of many—continue to lose out in an unreasonable and unfair way? Does she further agree that the Government are now quite deliberately planning to overpay some councils and underfund others? Does she agree that that is nothing less than a monumental fiddle by the Treasury? After 12 years in government, it is about time Labour stopped cooking the books and instead put them in order.

Julia Goldsworthy: Where I agree with my hon. Friend, and with the Conservatives, is on the need for a fundamental rethink about how the funding formula works, although that in itself will not be sufficient. If I refer to the motion to try to determine what the Conservative policy on council tax is, the only relevant thing that I can see is the part where it

"urges the Government to help fund councils in delivering a council tax freeze in England, as is already in operation in Scotland".

That is not a policy. It looks like a tactic for a year, but it would not be sustainable year on year.

I love how the Conservatives pray in aid the council tax freeze in Scotland. I am glad to hear that they support that policy, but I wonder whether they would follow the Scottish National party minority Administration's proposals to follow that up with a local income tax. Do the Conservatives agree with half that argument or with all of it?

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): I have been listening carefully to what the hon. Lady has been saying about local income tax, which her party supports. I understand that her party wishes to increase the threshold for the payment of income tax generally. Does that also apply to local income tax, and how does she propose to plug the shortfall arising from that?

Julia Goldsworthy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for showing such an interest in Liberal Democrat policy. Perhaps he is doing that because of the absence of any policy in his own party on this issue.

When I look at how the Conservatives propose to pay for that council tax freeze, I find that it would be paid for by reducing advertising and consultancy, which would involve about £700 million in year 2. I have already said that I have doubts about whether that measure would be genuinely localist, because it would increase the proportion of central Government spend in local government. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst did not say how many Conservative-controlled councils were planning to take him up on his offer. I wonder, too, whether there would be any perverse incentives for councils that wanted to benefit from additional resources. Might they have to make up the additional income that they needed to deliver services by increasing charges?

Barry Gardiner: I have been listening to what the hon. Lady has said, but I have also been listening for what she has not said. The hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) asked her a pertinent question about her party's policy on a local income tax. He asked whether certain people would be taken out of it. I am fairly sure that she has not yet been able to give him an answer, and I think that the House would be interested to know what her party's policy is on that.

Julia Goldsworthy: I must ask the hon. Gentleman to be patient, because I will come to that point all in good time. I have been on my feet for only 10 minutes, which is about a third of the time taken by the Secretary of State and only about a fifth of the time taken by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. I will respond to that question when I turn to the alternatives that we think should be put forward, but at the moment I am dealing with the Conservatives' motion, and their policy—or tactic, depending on which way we want to look at it. As I have said, it seems unlikely that it would provide a permanent solution, so I do not understand how it could form a programme for government.

I am also unsure about whether the Conservatives' approach to revaluation has been made clear. Given that we have not had a revaluation for 20 years, and that the Government and the Opposition think that the council tax system is the right way to fund local government, it is logical that that system should be based on a realistic valuation of people's properties, and that we therefore need to revalue. Unfortunately, neither party can have it both ways. They need to make it clear that a revaluation would be a consequence of staying with the existing system of taxation.

[Julia Goldsworthy]

In the absence of any clear statement of Conservative policy on local government finance, either in the motion or in the remarks of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I have been forced to turn to other areas for evidence. Barnet council has already been mentioned, and I shall come to that later, but I have decided to start my investigation in the other place.

The most recent contribution to the debate seems to have come from Lord Hanningfield, who is also the leader of Essex county council. In an interview in *The Observer*—which was reported in the *Western Morning News* on 15 September—he talked about a policy of localising welfare benefits. He said:

"The cost of living is far higher in Essex, say, than it is in Cornwall, so people do not need the same level of benefit".

Are we therefore going to see another tactic from the Conservatives? Are they going to use policy proposals such as these to make further cuts in services and penalise poor areas through the benefit system? They completely misunderstand that a low cost of living is not the same thing as a low-income area. I was disappointed that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst chose not to clarify that particular point.

I had a further look at some of the policies being pushed forward by Conservative-controlled councils. Perhaps the most eye-catching direction of travel seems to be from "easy Barnet", although I am not sure whether it is best to draw the parallel with easyJet or Ryanair. At first sight, the service looks fairly cheap, but the more one delves into it, the more one finds that services that should be core to what is being purchased are suddenly defined as extras. I understand that if people want to use the toilet on Ryanair flights, they will have to pay to do so. In Barnet, it appears that some services are heading the same way. I understand that even refuse collection may no longer be viewed as a core service. What it boils down to is that people will have to pay more for a worse service, with additional charges being made through the back door. I am not entirely sure that council tax payers will welcome a council tax freeze if the money is being taken away from their other hand.

If there is a key theme running through all these Conservative ideas—I would not say that they have any policies—it is the need to cut spending. That should not be seen as an end in itself, even though we are clearly in a difficult financial situation and there is a need for spending restraint. The Conservative approach has the effect of encouraging top-slicing—shaving off all budgets across the board, which means that it is more likely to impact on front-line jobs. For most councils, the largest element of spending is wages. It is easier to cut staff numbers than to cut entire programmes, but what the Conservative Front-Bench team should be doing is clearly to identify the programmes of spending that it considers to be high and low priority.

The leader in today's edition of *The Times* best summed all this up in pointing out that all the evidence points to the fact that the Conservatives want

"power rather more than"

they know

"what to do with it"

and that

"we still await a clear, unambiguous and compelling case for a Conservative government."

That point could not be better summed up than by the lack of any policy content whatever in today's Opposition day motion.

It is disappointing that there is a similar poverty of ambition in the Government's approach, as once again it seems that talking the talk is more important than walking the walk. If we go back a few years, the Lyons report was commissioned by the Government to look at the problem of structural difficulties in our local government taxation system. What happened there was that some very limited recommendations were made, but they were then hoofed as far as possible into the long grass. We have also seen an incremental approach towards local government finance, which makes things more complicated and even less transparent than they already are.

I am drawn to reflect on the debates we had on the business rate supplement scheme. Although technically a better debate at a local level is possible, it takes place around the margins, which makes it even more difficult for businesses to understand what their business rates and any supplements are paying for, and there is little democratic engagement in what the increases will provide.

The Government's latest offering is "Putting the Frontline First: smarter government". Having read it, I have to say that one would never have guessed that it was written by a former management consultant—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The language provides some warm words, but there are also some words that send a chill down my spine. For example, some bullet points talk about letting local areas set priorities and giving them more control over resources, but if we look at the detail, we discover that letting local areas set priorities apparently means

"streamlining the national-local performance framework".

That is obviously going to have a wonderful impact on allowing local people to determine priorities. Similarly, when it comes to local area control of resources, we suddenly find that this means:

"Enable local areas to guide the use of resources".

I am concerned that some key powers are being reserved. It all sounds very intangible and it seems that national targets are going to be aligned with local ones rather than granting genuine control to the local level.

The fundamental point that this report and the Government's approach miss is that we have an opportunity to re-engage people. The Government will be able to take advantage of that opportunity only if they offer—or at least talk about offering—options such as entering people who vote in a raffle for which the prize is an iPod. They think that that is what is necessary to engage people in voting.

Mr. Cox: On the question of localism, could the hon. Lady help us by clarifying one point? Who would levy the income tax proposed by the Liberal Democrats? Would it be levied by local district councils or—as was required by Liberal Democrat policy in the past—by regional assemblies?

Julia Goldsworthy: As the hon. Gentleman would know if he were paying any attention at all, it would be levied by local government.

The key point about the time of fiscal constraint that we are entering is that it provides an opportunity. All too often, politicians assume the lowest of intentions

among members of the public. They assume that no one wants to participate, and that that is due not to a lack of opportunity but to their refusal to engage. My experience has shown that people are more than willing to give up large amounts of their time to become involved in something that they think is important to their communities if it can be demonstrated that their involvement will have an impact on the outcome.

The aim of the Total Place pilots and the work achieved by the Sustainable Communities Act 2007—I was disappointed to note that neither the Secretary of State nor the Minister was able to attend the meeting that was held about that earlier this evening—is not just to provide more transparency, to make more information available online, and to allow councils to scrutinise more public spending in local areas. It is not just about a process; it is about engaging people

What the "Smarter Government" report does not make clear, and what the Government have failed to understand, is that if tough decisions are to be made about what should be the priorities at local level, those decisions should be made, engaged with and accountable for at local level. The Total Place pilots provide a real opportunity not just to ensure that bureaucrats from a number of different areas of public service sit around a table with their cheque books, but to allow people to engage in a debate. We have not heard enough from Government about that, but it is critical, which is why I was so disappointed that there was nothing about it in the Queen's Speech.

The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 represents another missed opportunity. Once again we were told that legislation would be all about engaging people in participation, but it ended up being about the architectural structures to which I believe the former Secretary of State has referred.

Dan Rogerson: And about how to respond to a petition.

Julia Goldsworthy: Indeed. It is entirely about turning people off politics, rather than showing them how their contribution can make a difference to the outcome.

All this makes clear to me that there are fundamental problems with the current system of local government finance, and that simply ignoring them will not make them go away. It is inherent in the current structure of local government finance that, on average, council tax will rise above the rate of inflation. It is also inherent in the system that we have a regressive council tax, because by definition it will hit hardest those on low and fixed incomes. People will feel the impact more because they are paying from net income rather than at source.

The position is made worse by the broadly 75:25 split between central Government's contribution to local services and the amount that is raised through council tax. That gearing makes it difficult for councils to prioritise services that they consider important, and also makes it difficult for people to understand exactly what the money is being spent on. On top of all that, we have a council tax benefit system under which an incredibly high proportion of people who are entitled to benefit are still failing to claim.

All those things add up not to a need for a freeze or a pilot, but to a need for more fundamental change. I simply cannot understand why neither of the main parties is willing to face up to that. We need a change that goes beyond local government taxation. We need a whole package of reform. Yes, there is a need to replace council tax with a progressive form of taxation based on ability to pay, but that is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is part of a process of ensuring that more is raised locally and less is raised nationally.

There are fair steps that can be taken to achieve that end. For instance, business rates could be localised, which would immediately ensure that councils raised more of what they spent at local level. We need a link with the national taxation system, which is why we have proposed a levy of 1 per cent. on each property with a value of over £2 million. We think that the priority should be making the whole tax system fairer, and that the best way to do that is to raise the income tax threshold to £10,000, which would make every person, on average, at least £700 better off. That would be a first step towards making the taxation system fairer, and it would be introduced alongside a whole series of other reforms designed to ensure that more money was raised and spent locally.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned the Liberal Democrat proposals for a local income tax. Can she briefly explain how it would work in respect of equalisation? More affluent areas where more people are working would obviously raise more local income tax to be able to invest in their services, but how would this work for more deprived areas with more people on benefits and lower value houses? Does the hon. Lady propose to have a central cap of some kind, or to have councils paying money into a central pot that is then redistributed?

Julia Goldsworthy: I am pleased to learn that the hon. Lady is taking such a great interest in Liberal Democrat policy. Perhaps her party is studying it because it has yet to come up with any proposal of its own. Our position is clear: we are currently saying that the 25:75 split between local and central Government is the wrong way around. We have at no point said that 100 per cent. of all local government spending should be raised locally. Of course there will be a need for some kind of equalisation measure.

Justine Greening: What kind?

Julia Goldsworthy: In the same way that we have an equalisation measure now. Of course, one of the biggest problems with the council tax system is that we have a benefit system whose take-up is very low. A local income tax removes the need for that at a stroke.

The hon. Lady refers to more deprived areas. One of the things that Total Place has exposed is that the more deprived an area is, the more likely it is that there will be lots of different agencies intervening to try to assist people. That results in a duplication of the administration that goes into supporting these areas and people. We need not only to look at local government spend and to tackle the problems of deprived areas, but to open up the whole area of spending that goes into supporting these groups of people.

Mr. Redwood: Is the hon. Lady's party proposing a regional income tax levied by the regional assembly, as well as a local income tax?

Julia Goldsworthy: No. I do not understand why the right hon. Gentleman does not understand that. We have never said that.

To conclude, we have a Government who fail to acknowledge that there is a problem at all. As far as they are concerned, there is no problem that cannot be sorted out by some kind of incrementalism that moves so slowly that I could almost watch my fingernails grow as the Government progress. The Conservatives may be able to identify the problem, but they do not propose any solution. Basically, the Conservative proposal is to put a different coloured label on the same tin, which has the net effect of changing a red label to a blue label. Whatever colour that label is, the product is the same, and, as far as I can see, it is certainly not a localist one, or one that will get anybody excited or engaged.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: So far in this debate, we have had contributions from those on the Front Bench. May I remind colleagues that the winding-up speeches will commence at 9.40 pm and that five Back Benchers hope to catch my eye? I want to try to accommodate everybody. I am afraid that I shall have to leave Members to do the maths for themselves.

8.58 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I shall try to be brief—although my heart always sinks when I hear a politician say that, because we always end up saying far more, and taking far longer, than we intended.

I rise to welcome the debate and the amount of money that Blackpool has had from this Government. We have had above-inflation increases year after year after year. I also want to talk about the additional sums of money the town has received, because of course local government gets support from central Government through other Departments, and that also needs to be taken into account in this calculation.

Let me first say a little about the changes that have taken place. I served for 12 years as a member of Lancashire county council, and I can remember the days when we had annual allocations, and, as a local authority, we could not plan. We lurched from one year to the next, not knowing what the budget would be. There was therefore no forward planning. At the end of some years we were desperately trying to spend money, whereas in other years we had totally run out. I have to say that, more often than not, we did not have the money. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) talked about social care. For seven of these years, I chaired the social services committee of Lancashire county council, and we never had enough money to deliver services.

Through the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, the last Conservative Government transferred responsibility for supporting people in residential care from the social security system to the social services departments of local authorities. They introduced us as gatekeepers but, at the same time, they cut back on the money. I have been in local government when, year after year we had cuts, and year after year we could not plan. Under this Labour Government, we have had year after year of above-inflation increases but, above all, we have also been given the ability to plan. We must never underestimate that and I welcome the fact that the Opposition parties acknowledge it.

Another thing that the Government have done is introduce new planning regimes—new opportunities to look regionally at the needs of an area and also to look at a micro-level in local authorities. Sadly, in years past central Government gave funding according to travel-to-work areas, and Blackpool was then in the travel-to-work area that included Wyre and parts of Fylde, two adjoining district councils that are affluent. Blackpool got precious little direct investment because it did not qualify. Now, as a local authority, Blackpool can access specific funding for the wards in the town centre where special need is identified, but it can also access funding from a regional perspective because the Northwest Regional Development Agency looks at all the areas of the north-west and targets special support on those areas. We have benefited from that re-examination of how best to target taxpayers' money in those areas of special need.

We also get money from other sources. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination will remember that when she was a Transport Minister, we had long debates about the Blackpool tramline. We have the money to upgrade the tramline and for new sea defences in both Blackpool and Cleveleys, where the money has come not only for sea defence but for beautiful new promenades that are improving the visitor attraction as well as the lives of our residents. We have had money spent on the schools and hospitals, but we have also recently had an allocation of £415,000 from the working neighbourhoods fund, which is helping the people of Blackpool who are unemployed and helping the local authority to get more people into work. We have had money from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for the Sea Change programme, so Blackpool has had £4 million to help to do up our wonderful new promenade. Cleveleys has had the same, as has Fleetwood, in the top end of my constituency. Lots of money has been going into local government and we have had investment in our play areas.

I want to echo a point that was made in an intervention. My local Conservative councillors are not backwards in coming forwards to claim credit for that spending and to be photographed in new playgrounds, new schools and our Sure Start children's centres. All this money comes from central Government and we here need to ensure that people understand that. It is that investment that has so improved the lives of my constituents. It goes into local government and is spent on their behalf and it comes from a variety of different Departments. I am hugely proud of the changes that have taken place. In my constituency and in that of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden), who is here in the Chamber, we have seen those improvements.

Finally, let me make a brief point about prudential borrowing. When I was a councillor, not only was that not available but we could not pool budgets. We could not work with other local authorities, with health authorities or with anybody. Now, local authorities have a chance—especially through prudential borrowing—to come up with exciting initiatives.

Blackpool council wants to buy back, to buy and to bring into local control Blackpool tower, the Winter gardens, which last night hosted the royal variety performance—and an excellent show it was—the golden mile and Tussauds. It can do that only if it gets support from central Government, if it is allowed to carry out prudential borrowing to raise money and if it gets European funding. Local government works best if it works in partnership with central Government and if central Government acknowledges areas of need and delivers. That is what this Government have been doing with local authorities of different persuasions. Long may this Government continue in power so that we do not go back to days such as those when I was in local government, when we never had the money to deliver the services that people need.

9.5 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I rise to defend myself against the strange charge from the Labour Benches that some years ago, when I was the Secretary of State for Wales, I sent back £120 million from the Treasury. I do not understand why, a few days after Labour issued the "Smarter Government" document, it should so strongly object to a Minister having practised smarter government some years ago. If only Labour had practised it in the past 12 years, we would not be facing the financial Armageddon that we currently face. That £120 million was not money that local government authorities needed, because they had had a full settlement. It was savings from changes regarding inefficiency, over-management and too much bureaucracy in the Wales Office.

Those savings were made by putting a freeze on staff and by stripping out back-office and overhead operations that we did not need. Of course, that money should have gone back to the Treasury because it was not money that we held. Even that Government were borrowing a bit, although we did not need to borrow as much. Surely Labour Members should welcome the fact that there was a pioneer of their smarter government. If only we had had their smarter government for the past 12 years, and if only we had had more for less, our economy would now be stronger and we would be in a better position. Instead, we have had 12 years of waste, incompetence, intervention, overriding local decision making, too much bureaucracy and inspection, and too many circulars. We have had ordeal by circular and ordeal by command and billions down the drain, and we have not been given better services.

Julia Goldsworthy: Would the right hon. Gentleman describe his actions, when he was the Secretary of State for Wales, as the "Smarter Government" document would, by saying that he was aligning the

"different sector-specific performance management frameworks across key local agencies"?

Mr. Redwood: No; I always try to speak in English. I think that that was another criticism of me at the time, but it is a good tip for politicians: they should not speak in jargon. In this place, they should always speak in English, which I believe is the preferred language of the *Hansard* reporters.

We meet today to debate, at last, an important settlement at a time of financial crisis. It seems that we are never allowed time to debate really big sums of money. We have had no debate on the £280 billion of guarantees of bad and toxic debts that have recently been announced, £170 billion of which was lent overseas in relation to things that make no difference to the jobs and prosperity of our country. The Government were trying to get away with a £47 billion expenditure block here with absolutely no debate, so I am grateful that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench think that this issue is worth debating. The Government's excuse, apart from lost letters, was that we do not need to debate the settlement every year because it is a three-year settlement. Of course we need to review the budget every year and consider the detail of the settlement every year, because it is fixed every year. It is a cop-out for the Government to say that we do not need to scrutinise such spending.

Barry Gardiner: I agree that this issue is worth debating. Given that the Conservatives have secured the debate, does the right hon. Gentleman consider it strange that there are as many Members on the Labour Benches as on the combined Opposition Benches?

Mr. Redwood: No, I do not find that strange, as there are many more Labour MPs because of the unfortunate decisions of the electorate at the last election, but we hope that they might think again in the light of what has happened in the past few years.

I have very little time left. The important question to ask is why, given that the Government have put a lot more money into local government, everyone is so unhappy. Councils are unhappy because they do not feel they have the money they need for all the requirements and inspections placed on them. The electors clearly are not happy because, as we have heard from Conservative Front Benchers, despite all that money going in, council tax has more than doubled during the Labour years.

I am not one who thinks that more money in total ought to be voted for this block of expenditure. I think that local government has to do more for less, just as central Government have to, but there is a simple solution that the Government ought to adopt. They ought to get out of the way. They should stop making all those demands on local government for information and inspection, and they should understand that we want local government delivered by local councillors and a limited number of offices. We do not want local councils to have to employ a very large number of very expensive people to fill in the forms, answer the inspections, deal with central Government or interpret all the information. We do not need 39 different special grants for local government: we want to get back to having a single block grant, over which councils have discretion. We do not wish to have this mighty inspection system, with its stars and black marks, that preoccupies so many very senior officers at enormous expense. We could probably halve the number of senior officers in a well run local authority if we stripped out all the demands from central and regional government.

We do not want regional government at all. We should trust local government, give it more power and take the powers away from the regions, which are unelected, unaccountable and much disliked in most parts of England. The Government have spent 12 years trying to get people to love their regions, but they do not and will not. The regions in England are artificial, and we do not want them. They are the layer of government that we wish to strip away.

[Mr. Redwood]

That would save us billions and start to solve the conundrum of why, although the Government have tipped so much money in, we are getting so little out, why so many voters do not think that the services are good enough, and why the councillors do not think that there is enough money to make the services better.

Richard Younger-Ross: The right hon. Gentleman says that we should strip out any form of regional government, but is he saying that all regional planning should therefore be done by central Government?

Mr. Redwood: No, I am saying that most planning should be done by the local community, with their representatives. The big items should be national items. If the aim was to drive a motorway across the country—and I do not think people want that at the moment—it should be a decision for national Government, defended and sorted out in the normal democratic way. If the wish was to build a new housing estate, that should be determined by the local council.

I think that my Front-Bench team are working on some very good ideas in this regard. A lot of councils do not want development in their area, sometimes for good reasons. If they were allowed to keep some of the benefits of a new development, and if there were a pot of money to provide compensation for people in the local area who would otherwise be adversely affected by the development, we might have the answer to the problem of achieving localism in action. There would still be development in the country, but it would be development that local communities and neighbours approved of or supported. People would not feel that developments were being rained down on them from the centre.

David Taylor: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I would love to, but the time constraints on us all mean that I have to sit down very shortly.

I want to mention briefly the extraordinary position that the Liberal Democrats have got themselves into yet again in this very short debate. We learn that they want to place a 1 per cent. tax on houses, although there seemed to be a row between their Front-Bench spokesmen about the value of the houses involved.

Richard Younger-Ross: No, no.

Mr. Redwood: The more vehement the denials, the bigger we know the row to be. I am sure that the problem relates to certain constituencies and the discovery, perhaps by the spokesman who came up with the lower value, that an awful lot of the houses would be in his constituency. We have learned tonight that the Liberal Democrats have no idea what they are going to do about the fact that, under the scheme, a few places in the country would have lots of money, but quite a lot of others would have no money at all. They do not know how they would redistribute it, but they said that the money would be raised in the ratio 75 local to 25 national, so most of the places without any expensive houses clearly would not get any money.

Then we heard that the Liberal Democrats want to introduce a local income tax. However, they have no idea what its threshold is, and we do not know whether there would be a higher rate and a lower rate. We do not know how progressive it would be. We have no idea how much money would be taken off the City of London and Westminster, where incomes tend to be quite high, and how much of it would be sent around the country.

The proposal is absolutely clueless but of course completely irrelevant, because parties that think they might win the election know that the public will never fall for a local income tax. National income tax is already quite high enough and there is no scope for doing what the Liberal Democrats propose.

When I was given the job of putting the council tax in place—which I did not want—I made only two claims for it. One was that it would be a little less unpopular than the community charge, and the other was that it would last a bit longer than the community charge. I am delighted to say that both things came true. I never thought it was very good. All taxes are unpopular and they all have their defects, but the fact that council tax is still around after 12 years of Labour Government shows th[illegible]h main parties have come to the conclusion that [illegible] least bad option.

It is now up to us and local government to live within the amount the tax provides, which can be done only by smarter government, although that will need a change of Government. I like the phrase "smarter government". We need to do more for less and the sooner we have a Government who can help councils do that by stripping away the on-costs and bureaucracy, the better it will be.

9.14 pm

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): I have come to regard it as a painful duty to speak in debates such as this and to bring a report from the front line of Conservative local government in Hammersmith and Fulham—the Leader of the Opposition's favourite council. We now hear from the Conservative party chairman that Conservative councils demonstrate how the Conservatives will run the country. After seeing how the financial settlement was treated in Hammersmith and Fulham, I feel that we need a post-watershed warning about violent and disturbing images. Three principles govern what happens in that authority: increasing charges, cutting services and disposing of assets.

In the last three years, charges for meals on wheels have been increased by 60 per cent. There is now a £15 million surplus in the parking account. Adult education fees, particularly for people of pension age, have shot up, because the council falsely claims that it is age discrimination to give concessions to the over-60s, despite the fact that many other London councils do so. The council even charged for recycling, and then claimed that the service was unpopular and cut it altogether.

Most significant, having given a clear, one-line promise in their manifesto not to introduce charges for home care, within six months of election the Conservatives introduced charges of £12.40 an hour for home helps. They have substantially cut the home care and resident warden services. I am sorry that the hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Cox), who was complaining about resident warden services, is no

longer in the Chamber, because such decisions are for local government. The Opposition cannot say that local government should have the power to make local decisions and then blame central Government for decisions taken locally. The proudest boast of the leader of my Conservative council is that he has cut 1,000 jobs in three years—1,000 jobs in the middle of a recession—not bureaucrats, but home helps, wardens and other people who provide front-line public services.

The voluntary sector has been cut massively, particularly advice services and services for black and minority ethnic groups. The schools budget has been cut to the bare minimum, while schools have been loaded with additional central costs. So far, so typical.

The next phase of development is asset sales, including youth clubs, community buildings and 13 hostels for the homeless—65 self-contained units of accommodation sold off at public auction, which means that the price received by the council is about 20 per cent. below market value. Sixty-five families who were living in council hostels at a cost to the taxpayer of between £100 and £200 a week will now be in private rented accommodation at a cost of between £500 and £600 a week, but that does not matter to a Conservative council because the income tax payer rather than the council tax payer will pick up the increased bill.

Schools have been told specifically to sell their sites to private education institutions. One has to ask where it is all leading. I shall hold that thought for a moment while I fill in one or two other parts of the canvas in the little time I have for my speech.

I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (John Austin) in relation to the chutzpah of Conservative councils in claiming credit for central Government initiatives. If Members drive around Hammersmith Broadway, they will see banners hanging from the lamp posts that North Korea would have been ashamed to put up, with claims about the £200 million the council has invested in secondary schools, the £200 million it has invested in decent homes or the 13 Sure Start centres it has opened. The council has taken over a local primary care trust and now even claims credit for investment in the NHS as well.

Mr. Redwood: Would the hon. Gentleman like to praise that council for cutting its council tax by 3 per cent. every year for four years and delivering better services? Is that not smarter government?

Mr. Slaughter: I am so pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has made that point. If he had been listening, he would have heard that about £63 million has been raised through increased charges for services and cuts in services. The service user and the taxpayer get a bad deal out of the average 50p a week saving, every year, on council tax. I shall put the question back to the right hon. Gentleman. If he is such a fan of the Conservative council and its leader, who is head of the Tory party's innovation unit, he will agree, I am sure, with the comment that the leader made at a public seminar 10 days ago, when he said:

"My mates are all in the Shadow Cabinet, waiting to get those"—

ministerial—

"boxes, being terribly excited. I went to university with them—they haven't run a piss up in a brewery."

Actually, the right hon. Gentleman may agree with the comment about—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Can I just remind the hon. Member that moderation in language would be much more acceptable in the Chamber?

Mr. Slaughter: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. I should have said, "an occasion when a lot of alcohol is drunk in a brewery." However, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) had that argument with a Deputy Speaker, and I believe that excretory terms are permissible, provided that they are in context, as I think the council leader intended that comment to be. It is one that I am sure we all echo.

I do not think that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) made a good point, but one would not know that if one lived in Hammersmith. I wonder what he thinks of this: more than £1 million of taxpayers' money is spent simply on propaganda, and that ranges from poster vans driving around the borough, advertising how good the council is, to advertising on stations, in phone boxes and on lamp post banners, and a fortnightly newspaper that costs about £750,000 to run.

Mr. Redwood: I seem to remember that one of the cuts, as the hon. Gentleman calls them, that the council has made is to include advertising in that newspaper so that it has a nil cost to the taxpayer—unlike its predecessor publication, which was very expensive for the Labour council.

Mr. Slaughter: Sadly, the right hon. Gentleman is partially informed again. There is advertising, and that is principally from the public sector—from the council and other public institutions. However, in addition to that cost, which covers printing, there are on-costs and the cost of staffing, premises and so forth. The total cost before advertising is about £750,000; the net cost is still about £350,000. Again, I put the question to him. Is that particularly good value?

Is it particularly good value that both chief executives of the local authorities in my constituency are paid more than the Prime Minister? Is it particularly good value that, while boasting of a pay freeze for senior officers this year, those chief executives gave themselves up to a 9 per cent. increase last year? Is it particularly good value that the leader of one council attempted to give himself a 14 per cent. pay rise for doing the job that he was already doing? We in Hammersmith do not yet, however, have what Kensington and Chelsea has, which is the first £100,000 a year councillor, topping up his salary with money from London councils and, with great irony, the Audit Commission, too.

In the moment or so that I have left, I shall return to the question that I posed earlier. Where does a local authority go when it has raised charges for vulnerable people, in particular, cut services for people in straitened circumstances and sold off the assets—the schools and the community centres that people use? The answer, particularly in an area of deprivation such as Shepherd's Bush, is quite simple: the local authority gets rid of the people themselves. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State suggested earlier, that is exactly what is intended when 3,500 social homes are due for demolition in the borough and there is no guarantee that the residents will receive like-for-like or replacement homes.

[Mr. Slaughter]

The tenants of the first of those estates earmarked for demolition, West Kensington and Gibbs Green, had been told that they live in "not decent neighbourhoods". However, I am very proud to say that yesterday evening they served on the council leader a notice to quit, requiring him under the Labour Government's legislation to transfer ownership of their estate to them. They are going nowhere; they are staying in the place that has been their home for many years; and they hope for the return of a Labour council, which will restore to them some of the services that have been cut.

In the meantime, the council's plans range at one extreme, from the simple slash-and-burn cuts in services that we see from many other Tory councils, to the other extreme, which we have not seen in west London for 20 years, since the days of Shirley Porter, of gerrymandering and of social engineering. They are examples of exactly what the Conservative party says when it states, "This demonstrates how we will run the country." I welcome any hon. Member from any party to come to Hammersmith and see exactly how that would be done.

9.24 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to take part in tonight's debate on local government funding. Several hon. Members have made clear the pressures that are placed on many local authorities in delivering value for their areas and ensuring that council tax increases are kept to the absolute minimum. That is why I support the policies that have been put forward by Conservative Members to try to ensure that there is a council tax freeze in relation to our own councils.

I want to deal with some general matters as regards funding for local authorities and, in particular, to localise the issue in relation to my own local authority—the London borough of Havering. There has been some debate about population data and methodology. I want to highlight the issue of the elderly populations contained within many local authority areas and the impact that that has on projections. That applies particularly to my area, which has the largest number of older residents of any London borough. In the years between now and 2023, we expect there to be an increase of some 9,300 in the number of people aged over 65, with a particularly marked rise in the number of those aged over 85. We need to think about what that will mean in terms of the pressures on social care and the ability of council budgets to cope with those demands.

Havering, as a nice leafy green borough, is seen as having lots of owner-occupied homes and historically low levels of unemployment, diversity and deprivation, although pockets of deprivation do exist. That apparent prosperity masks the increasing pressures of dealing with a settled and ageing population. Several residents live in mortgage-free homes—the asset-rich, cash-poor population—but their apparent comfort masks an increasing need for social care support. With an ageing population and dwindling resources, the pressures on services will grow, and there does not appear to be within the local government finance formula a proper recognition and acknowledgement of that issue and how it will increase in importance over time as the demand for social services and support services for the elderly continues to increase.

Talking about the pressures on local councils is not simply about the methodology arguments on how the funding is allocated, but about how the Government have changed their mind on certain key issues and the impact that that is having on local councils in dealing with it. We have had the discussion about how this is all about three-year funding settlements, which implies that councils should be given greater certainty and an ability to plan their budgets and to know what they can do for the benefit of their local residents. Yet two recent examples have thrown a very big spanner in the works for London councils, in particular, in being able to ensure that they can plan their budgets effectively.

The first example concerns the Government's change of approach on the decent homes standard. It was said that if an arm's length management organisation achieved two-star status, funding would flow through to it and the benefits would accrue to local residents, who would get the new windows, bathrooms and kitchens that many of them had been patiently waiting for. However, in Havering, when our ALMO, Homes in Havering, attained two-star status, that funding did not come with it because the Government had changed the rules and requirements and decided to reallocate the money under their Building Britain's Future programme. Our ALMO had been waiting patiently to deliver the important changes whereby local residents could see the significant improvements that they had been promised, but it got a slap in the face instead of the funding that it had been expecting. That means that Havering council, in seeking to meet those aspirations and demands, is having to try to identify funding in order to deliver sooner the benefits that were expected to accrue. It is having to deal with the problems imposed on it by being promised that money and then finding out that it had been reallocated even though the planning and budgeting had been done on the basis that it would be available.

Councillor Michael Armstrong of Havering council recently said

"we will fight tooth and nail to reverse the Government's U-turn and secure the funding we were promised. Homes in Havering has achieved the standard that the Government set and ministers must now honour their side of the deal."

I hope that the Minister will provide some assurance about what is happening to the decent homes money, because my residents in Havering were promised something that has now been taken away from them.

The second example is the change in funding for the freedom pass. London was set to receive about £58 million in 2010-11 and councils had planned on that basis, but we now discover that they have not got that money, and the Department for Transport consultation proposes that about £30 million should be clawed back.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): My hon. Friend from my neighbouring constituency will know that the increase in cash for Havering council this year is about £750,000, but £500,000 of that will be used up on the extra costs of safeguarding children, and the council now has to find another £1 million to pay for the change in special grant for the freedom pass, which all our elderly residents value so highly.

James Brokenshire: I agree entirely. I regard the freedom pass as extremely important for the over-60s, and the Government tinker with it at their peril. My hon. Friend

is right that Havering is having to find an extra £1 million, and we may hear from the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling) that Croydon has a black hole in its budget. I know that Bexley will have to find another £1 million as a consequence of the very late change that has taken place. It is all very well telling councils to find efficiency savings and plan on a certain basis, but if they suddenly have to find an extra £1 million from their coffers at the last moment, it places them in an extraordinarily difficult situation.

It is telling that we have been told tonight that there is a consultation taking place and the Government are consulting us on whether they should press ahead with the changes. I listened carefully to what the Secretary of State said, and it struck me that he had a closed mind, that no consultation is taking place and that the Government have decided that that funding will not now be put in place. They want councils to take the lead and the responsibility for their residents, but the Government have responsibilities as well. Saying to councils at the last moment, "We promised you the money, it's not there, you've got to deal with that now", hardly makes it easy for councils to ensure that they deliver the value for money and council tax freezes that we want. The Government are reneging on the deal at the last minute and placing those councils in that extremely difficult situation.

9.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): We had a fairly acerbic start to the debate, with discussions about exchanges of correspondence or otherwise, which I felt was beneath the dignity of such a good Cabinet Minister as the Secretary of State. I would prefer to emphasise the importance of Front Benchers regarding themselves as accountable to the whole House, not to each other.

I start with some thanks, first to Her Majesty's Opposition for securing the debate so that we have the opportunity to represent our constituents' concerns, as the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) said. I also thank the Government for the significant support that they have given Croydon in capital spending, promises of extra spending on schools, local enterprise growth initiative money and funding for extra social housing. I particularly wish to mention Councillor Dudley Mead of Croydon council, who takes a positive view of the importance of providing extra social housing, working in conjunction with the Greater London authority and the Government. I thank the Government also for the letter that I recently received about the money to support town centres that has come to Croydon, although the £50,000 provided may well be too little, bearing in mind that just in George street 17 properties are out to let.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) was challenged on the relative bandings of the properties in his constituency and how highly they are rated. The key question would have been how much residents in south London pay in council tax. In many ways, the existence of London government inevitably means that a great deal of money is transferred away from south London to other priorities in both central and east London. There is very great deal of concern within the Croydon business community that the supplementary rate that was previously passed will mean that money will be taken away from businesses at a difficult time to support major schemes elsewhere in the capital.

I apologise for wanting to put Croydon first in this debate, but I should like to draw some issues to the attention of those on both Front Benches in looking forward to what will happen in next year's review of local government expenditure, which will perhaps cover a three-year period. The London borough of Croydon has long suffered from how the area cost adjustment is calculated within London. Croydon is regarded as an east London authority, whereas neighbouring areas such as Sutton are regarded as being in west London, where costs are presumed to be higher. That is not entirely logical. When Croydon works on a strategic partnership basis on contracts with, say, Lambeth, it will pay the same rate for work done on its highways, but it will nevertheless be rewarded, in terms of grant, at a lower rate than Lambeth.

Croydon is facing particular challenges because of the number of individuals who, because of their migration status, have no recourse to public funds. The local authority quite rightly estimates that that costs £2.5 million a year, and that a further £2.5 million will fall upon council tax payers as a result of the closure of the walk-in asylum centre in Liverpool and the transfer of some of those applicants to Croydon. I warn the Government that that is very unpopular with the residents of Croydon. When the Home Secretary came to his home town to speak to the local Labour party, he was interviewed by the *Croydon Advertiser* and said that no money would be provided in compensation. That had a very deleterious effect on support for the Labour party in Croydon.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch mentioned the important matter of the freedom pass. The cost in his borough will be £1 million, but in Croydon the cost will be £1.5 million. I am sure we are all determined to ensure that such financial issues do not stop us defending the provision of the freedom pass within London.

It is not as though Croydon has been slow in trying to be efficient. Sixty million pounds of efficiency savings have been found in recent years. The local council outperforms the 4 per cent. target for efficiency savings that the Government expect and seeks savings of 5 per cent., partly by working through strategic partnerships. However, with further legislation such as the Personal Care at Home Bill before the House, the reality is that the council will struggle to find such efficiency savings. It may well be difficult for Croydon to deal with the prospect of the introduction of a cap at 3 per cent. Unlike London Labour authorities, Croydon has been unable to match those zero per cent. approaches towards setting budgets. Indeed, it has been disappointing that it has had to set increases at 4 per cent. a year.

There are ways in which Croydon can make savings. It is more difficult to make the case for Croydon when a very significant loan of £145 million has been secured to build a new town hall. That cannot be a priority when the town has other important and pressing needs. I would have thought it better for Croydon to consider becoming a tenant in a development at east Croydon, on the Croydon Gateway site. That approach would have a multiplier effect in terms of getting that development going and giving others the confidence to invest in Croydon's property market. It also needs to be borne in

[Mr. Andrew Pelling]

mind that councillors receive £6 million in allowances over the four-year period that they are in office. Some transfer of that money to improve policing, for example, would be more effective.

Finally, please remember that Croydon is facing dynamic population change, partly because we are the headquarters for the migration service in this country. Please also remember that many of the jobs that Croydon people enjoyed were in the City, and not necessarily at the high rates of pay talked about in the media. Croydon is dependent on public sector jobs—29 per cent. of our jobs are in the public sector. The prospect of jobs being transferred outside the south-east could prove a particular challenge for Croydon and increase the need for effective local government financial support in the future.

9.40 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): This has been an interesting and important debate. The announcement of the local government finance settlement is an opportunity for Ministers to outline their plans for the future of local government funding. How much council tax people have to pay and, critically, how much money their council will get to enable it to provide local facilities and services are of huge relevance to many people's everyday lives. The debate has never been more important, given the current economic situation, but in spite of that the only reason we have had this debate today is that the Opposition have made time for it. We have used an Opposition day to force the Government to debate a fundamentally important topic for local communities across the country. Parliament is moving—we hope—towards more accountability and transparency. Ministers' attempts to stifle debate on the local government finance settlement fly in the face of that progress.

Today's debate showed starkly the choice that the British electorate face. They can have either councils that are accountable to them or councils that are accountable to Ministers in Whitehall, who think that local communities need to be spoon-fed with central Government diktat and priorities. We have heard that repeatedly in some interesting contributions to today's debate. I do not have time to mention all of them, but the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) talked about how her council is making the most of the powers that it has. I note that it is a Conservative council, but I am sure that she is working with it to help it to make the most of its opportunities.

David Taylor: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Justine Greening: I have little time, so I will not give way. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who talked about how his drive for efficiencies when he was in office has, in many respects, set the tone for what can be achieved. He expressed real concern about the waste and incompetence that we have seen in recent years.

We never fail on these occasions to hear from the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter). I nearly renamed him the hon. Member for Shepherd's Bush, because Ealing and Acton never seem to get a look in. Residents in that area have an MP who does not talk about their council much. He did talk about residents getting a bad deal from Hammersmith and Fulham council, but it must have been 10 times worse when his party was running the council.

We also heard an important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) who sensitively and carefully pointed out the pressures on care budgets for the elderly, many arising from demographic changes that will be hard to deal with, however hard we try. He was right to raise his concerns about the cuts to the freedom pass, which enables many elderly people across London to remain independent in their day-to-day lives, which is critical.

In the speech we just heard, the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling) rightly made the case for his constituents. That is an example of why having an oral statement rather than a written one is so important to Members' ability to do their job and represent their communities.

The bottom line is that, however Ministers dress it up, council tax has doubled under this Government and is set to rise further—way above the current rate of inflation. As we have heard, next year, residents in many parts of the country can expect rises of 3 per cent.—well above inflation—which will push up many people's council tax to £1,500 a year. In a recession on the scale of the present one, that is unaffordable for many people.

Why are councils under so much pressure? It is partly because they have extra burdens. A raft of initiatives has been pushed down on them by Ministers. So many initiatives have been inflicted on them that the proportion of individual, area and specific grants that are ring-fenced has risen from about 4 per cent. of the grant in 1997 to 15 per cent. now. Councils are less and less able to deliver flexible services for their residents. In fact, the Local Government Association worked out that if councils had more flexibility, they could save £900 million a year. That is surely worth having to reinvest in better local services. The bottom line is that we need our councils to set their priorities locally and deliver them locally, but they cannot do that under the current Government.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): What incentive does my hon. Friend believe there is for extremely efficient councils—for instance, West Sussex county council—that run their affairs extremely well, given that they get the lowest possible grant settlement?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We did not get much chance to discuss today the fact that debate on local government financing in this Chamber often focuses on how to divide up the pie, when it should be more about how we can help and encourage local councils to increase the amount of investment available to them locally. That is precisely why we have talked not only about our council tax freeze policy, under which we will work in partnership with local councils to help them to keep council tax down, but about how we will help councils willing to develop their communities through a council tax matching policy, which will help to alleviate residents' concerns about pressures on infrastructure when they develop housing in their areas, for example.

We will also encourage councils to develop local economies, jobs, businesses and extra facilities in their communities through business improvement grants. That means that we will incentivise councils' growing their business rates by allowing them to keep any increases above the inflationary rise set in Whitehall.

Mr. Slaughter: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Justine Greening: I am not going to take any interventions from the hon. Gentleman.

David Taylor: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can your advise the House on whether "Erskine May" has anything to say about Opposition spokespeople who refuse to take anything other than friendly interventions from their own side?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): That is certainly not a point of order for the Chair and is simply wasting time at this point in the evening.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I was about to say that the other big cost pressure that many councils have had to put up with has been the huge cost and waste involved in inspections. The Lyons inquiry-estimated that about £2 billion is spent on the monitoring process. We have to reduce that. That money should be going into improving local services and cutting council tax bills for residents. Instead, it is spent on exactly the wrong things: it is spent on councils reporting upwards and being accountable to Ministers, when the focus should be on being accountable to their own electorate.

The worst thing is that such burdens, ring-fencing and top-down scrutiny from Ministers in Whitehall who do not know the communities that they are dealing with are only set to grow. We have had a similar Opposition day debate before, and now we are talking about further financial pressures on local councils resulting from some of the Government's plans for taking care of the elderly. The situation is not tenable, which is why we want to set out a different vision for local government finance.

As I have said, we want to introduce incentives and to ensure that the formula is developed sensitively and that the Audit Commission can look at it to ensure that it is transparent and fair. We need to move on to a new chapter in local government finance where councils get the powers, flexibility and resources necessary to deliver what local communities, not just Ministers, want; where there are real incentives; and where councils and the communities that they represent can truly share the benefits. It is a clear choice, and the sooner the public get to make it at a general election, the better.

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Barbara Follett): I wish that I could say that this had been an interesting and wide-ranging examination—[HON. MEMBERS: "It says here."] No, it does not say that here. I wish that I could say that this had been an interesting and wide-ranging examination of the local government finance settlement, but it has not. With one or two honourable exceptions, on both sides of the House, this has been just the sort of blustering, grandstanding, smug, "We know better than you and just wait until our side gets in" kind of exchange that puts most normal people off politics and, frankly, puts me off listening to you all.

When I wrote to the hon. Members for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy)—I did write to them, on 12 November—I pointed out that there was going to be an oral statement. The last time there were very few Members in the Chamber, and we regretted that there were so few. We would have liked to debate it, and you do get a chance to debate it in January, when you debate the financial settlement, so you have not lost the chance—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am reluctant to interrupt the Minister, but she must use the correct parliamentary language.

Barbara Follett: Forgive me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I should have known better.

Hon. Members: Yes, you should.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There are rules for manners all round in the House. Hon. Members should now listen to what the Minister has to say.

Barbara Follett: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We in the Chamber should have known better, because we have wasted an opportunity this time. In his opening remarks, the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), conceded that the three-year settlement was a good thing. On that, if very little else, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agreed with him. He pointed out that this year, the last year of that three-year settlement, councils will get a 4 per cent. increase in funding, bringing the investment in local government to £76.3 billion in 2010-11.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne, at least managed to get off the subject of who did or did not initiate this debate and why. For the record, let me point out again that the House will have a chance to debate the settlement for 2010-11 when it approves the finance report in January. I will certainly try to find out what happened to the letters. I have a copy here and will give everyone one later. I was sorry that the hon. Lady did not develop her party's ideas a little more clearly. She spent most of her time telling the other parties what they were doing wrong and hinting at what she might do right if the Liberal Democrats got into power.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) was quite a change: she was positive and proud. I really understood her pleasure in seeing her constituency develop in the way that it has. Like her, I have seen changes in my constituency, Stevenage. I am glad that she has found the prudential borrowing regime so helpful.

Despite remarks from the Opposition, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter) has been a doughty campaigner for his constituency, including against the injustices that have come in under the Conservative council.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) made some thoughtful comments about the high proportion of elderly residents in Havering and the growing number of older people, with whom Governments of all types will most certainly have to deal in future, and deal with seriously. I hope that he will welcome the Government's engagement with the issue of future funding for adult social care, and also that he will get involved when his local authority makes representations to the consultation on the distribution of concessionary fares that is now being held by the Department for Transport.

[Barbara Follett]

The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling) made some telling points about highways maintenance in Croydon. This is a problem across the country, and he will no doubt welcome the fact that we are keeping the formula under review, including the area cost adjustment, to which he referred, in relation to highways costs. Of course, Croydon and other London boroughs are welcome to put their evidence into the review being held by the Department for Transport, and I hope that they will do so.

I realise that I might have been impatient and immoderate at the beginning of my speech, but, as someone who cares deeply about this place and its reputation, I do not think that any of us did it any good today with the kind of debate that we indulged in. Local government finance is a highly technical and complex area that would benefit from a much more in-depth debate than the one we had here today. I regret that we have wasted our time in this way.

Mr. Redwood: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It seems to me that we should fill the time allocated for the debate. That statement from the Minister was a disgrace. If she is so critical of all the rest of us, she could at least have done the House the courtesy of giving us some information and offering a defence of a badly thought-through settlement that has been inadequately debated. Instead, she comes to the House, insults those of us who did participate in the debate, and gives us absolutely nothing in the way of argument, fact or consideration in the light of the many powerful points that have been made today. I hope that she will reflect on that and apologise.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am now going put the question.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31 (2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 156, Noes 330.

Division No. 16] **[9.57 pm**

AYES

Alleyne, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Baron, Mr. John
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, David T.C. (Monmouth)
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Mr. Andrew
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Rosindell, Andrew
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeremy Wright and
James Duddridge

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barnett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe

Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brake, Tom
Bread, Mr. Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Burt, Lorely
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Cooker, Mr. Vernon
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Davey, Mr. Edward
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, rh Paul
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, Simon
Hulme, Chris
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hunter, Mark
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laws, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moore, Mr. Michael
Morden, Jessica
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Rennie, Willie
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rogerson, Dan
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda

Ward, Claire
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Frank Roy and
Mary Creagh

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).
That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 193.

Division No. 17] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Oliver, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis

Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Frank Roy and Mary Creagh

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Mr. Andrew
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
James Duddridge and Jeremy Wright

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House congratulates the Government on introducing the first ever three year settlement for local government which will have provided an additional £8.6 billion for local government over three years, and continues to build upon the 39 per cent. real terms increase in funding provided to local government over the first 10 years of this Government; welcomes the four per cent. increase proposed for next year which, given the current level of inflation, would be the 13th straight year of above inflation increases; recognises the immense help this will give to local

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

authorities throughout the country in dealing with difficult economic circumstances resulting from the global downturn; anticipates the lowest council tax increase for 16 years; rejects the calls from Her Majesty's Opposition to cut the Department for Communities and Local Government's budget by over £1 billion, which would lead either to cuts in local services or an increase in council tax bills of one per cent. to pay for the missing millions; and further welcomes the Government's Green Paper, Shaping the Future of Care Together, which sets out its vision to reform the adult care and support system in England.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We shall take motions 2 and 3 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Corporation Tax

That the draft Real Estate Investment Trusts (Prescribed Arrangements) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 5 November, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.

Social Security

That the draft Social Security (Contributions Credits for Parents and Carers) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 12 October, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(1)),

Fisheries Catch Quotas for 2010

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 14738/09 and Addendum 1, draft Council Regulation fixing for 2010 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks, applicable in Community waters and, for Community vessels, in waters where catch limitations are required; supports the Government's approach, which is in line with the principles enshrined in the Common Fisheries Policy, to seek adoption of measures which provide for the sustainable exploitation of fishery resources, based on sound scientific advice and on the precautionary approach; and further accepts the Government's overarching objective of seeking a balanced and fair settlement across all the negotiations which promotes the long-term sustainable exploitation of fish stocks in European waters, the economic viability of the UK fishing industry and the protection of vulnerable species.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

REGIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES (LONDON)

Motion made,

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Andy Slaughter and Mr Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We now come to petitions—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I advise the House that time is crucial and I would like to explain how we plan to do this.

There are a large number of petitions to be presented and I hope that it will be of assistance to the House if I set out how we shall proceed.

Once the first petition relating to the Badman report has been read to the House, with its prayer, subsequent petitions on the same topic should not be read out in full. Members should give a brief description of the number and location of the petitioners, and state that the petition is "in the same terms".

When a Member has presented a petition, she or he should proceed directly to the petitions bag at the back of the Chair. I will call the next Member immediately their predecessor has finished speaking.

In addition to petitions relating to the Badman report, I understand that there are two Members who wish to present petitions relating to Equitable Life. I trust that these will also be presented expeditiously.

At the expiry of half an hour no further petitions may be presented orally, but they may be placed in the petition bag and will be recorded as formally presented.

I call Mr. Graham Stuart.

PETITIONS

Badman Report (Beverley and Holderness)

10.27 pm

Mr. Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): This is an historic night. More than 70 right hon. and hon. Members will present petitions from more than 120 different constituencies opposing the compulsory registration and monitoring of home-educated children. The previous record for petitions presented in one day is 44 in March 2006.

If enacted, the Government's proposals will, for the first time in our history, tear away from parents and give to the state the responsibility for a child's education. I should like to thank the thousands of people who have signed the petitions, the co-ordinators and organisers, and those outside in candle-lit vigil earlier this evening.

I am grateful to the Speaker for allowing us half an hour to present the petitions. As has already been said, although I shall read out the full text, he has asked that others do not do so.

I wish to present a petition on behalf of those in the Beverley and Holderness constituency opposed to proposals to register and monitor home-educated children.

The petition states:

The Petition of persons resident in the Beverley and Holderness parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000490]

I also wish to present petitions in the same terms on behalf of the my hon. Friends the Members for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), my hon. Friends the Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire), my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller), the right hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), the hon. Members for Newport, West (Paul Flynn), for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford), for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis), for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin), and for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland), my hon. Friends the Members for Salisbury (Robert Key) and for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner), my hon. Friends the Members for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) and for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), the hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird), the right hon. Member for Basildon (Angela E. Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Cox), the hon. Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams), my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), the hon. Members for Dudley, South (Ian Pearson), for Wrexham (Ian Lucas), for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik), for Battersea (Martin Linton), for Poplar and Canning Town (Jim Fitzpatrick), and for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods), the right hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Beverley Hughes), the hon. Members for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) and for Reading, West (Martin Salter), the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) and the hon. Members for Eccles (Ian Stewart), for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Joan Walley) and for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter).

Badman Report (North East Hertfordshire)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the parliamentary constituency of North East Hertfordshire and others,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000621]

Badman Report (Stratford-on-Avon)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Stratford-on-Avon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000594]

Badman Report (Winchester)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Winchester parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory

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annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000489]

Badman Report (Daventry)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Daventry parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000588]

Badman Report (Spelthorne)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Spelthorne parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000488]

Badman Report (Skipton and Ripon)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Skipton and Ripon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000590]

Badman Report (Ellesmere Port and Neston)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Ellesmere Port and Neston parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines

for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000598]

Badman Report (Norwich South)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Norwich South parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000494]

Badman Report (Newport West)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Newport West parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000555]

Badman Report (Colne Valley)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Colne Valley parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000591]

Badman Report (Finchley and Golders Green)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Finchley and Golders Green parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000620]

Badman Report (Hereford)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Hereford parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that

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the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000491]

Badman Report (Dudley North)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Dudley North parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000595]

Badman Report (Leeds North West)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Leeds North West parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000546]

Badman Report (Salisbury)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Salisbury parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000609]

Badman Report (Mid Sussex)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Mid Sussex parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to

ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000584]

Badman Report (Brighton Kemptown)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Brighton Kemptown parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000556]

Badman Report (South East Cambridgeshire)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the South East Cambridgeshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000557]

Badman Report (The Wrekin)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in The Wrekin parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000596]

Badman Report (Redcar)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Redcar parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000593]

Badman Report (Basildon)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Basildon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that

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the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000592]

Badman Report (Mole Valley)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Mole Valley parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000600]

Badman Report (Torridge and West Devon)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Torridge and West Devon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000574]

Badman Report (Conwy)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Conwy parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000589]

Badman Report (Welwyn Hatfield)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Welwyn Hatfield constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry

into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000607]

Badman Report (Hartlepool)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Hartlepool constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000611]

Badman Report (Beckenham)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Beckenham constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000610]

Badman Report (Dudley South)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Dudley South constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000605]

Badman Report (Wrexham)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wrexham constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000606]

Badman Report (Montgomeryshire)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Montgomeryshire constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that

[Mr Graham Stuart]

the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000572]

Badman Report (Battersea)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Battersea constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000578]

Badman Report (Poplar and Canning Town)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Poplar and Canning Town constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000577]

Badman Report (City of Durham)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the City of Durham constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000573]

Badman Report (Stretford and Urmston)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Stretford and Urmston constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for

tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000585]

Badman Report (Crawley)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Crawley constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000582]

Badman Report (Reading West)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Reading West constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000608]

Badman Report (Torfaen)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Torfaen constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000604]

Badman Report (Eccles)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Eccles constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000597]

Badman Report (Stoke-on-Trent)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Stoke-on-Trent constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000575]

Badman Report (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000602]

Mr. Graham Stuart also presented petitions in the same terms on behalf of his hon. Friends the member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) [P000570]; for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley) [P000619]; for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) [P000601]; for St. Albans (Anne Main) [P000496]; and the hon. Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) [P000603].

Equitable Life (Ware)

10.30 pm

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I wish to present two petitions. The first is on behalf of constituents living in Ware regarding the Government's response to the parliamentary ombudsman's reports on Equitable Life.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of residents of the constituency of Hertford and Stortford in England regarding the Government's response to the Parliamentary Ombudsman's reports on Equitable Life.

Declares that the Petitioners either are or they represent or support members, former members or personal representatives of deceased members of the Equitable Life Assurance Society who have suffered maladministration leading to injustice, as found by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in her report upon Equitable Life, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 16 July 2008 and bearing reference number HC 815; and further declares that the Petitioners or those whom they represent or support have suffered regulatory failure on the part of the public bodies responsible from the year 1992 onwards, but have not received compensation for the resulting losses and outrage.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000459]

Badman Report (Hertford and Stortford)

Mr. Prisk: My second petition is on behalf of my constituents across Hertford and Stortford concerning the recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Hertford and Stortford parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000451]

Badman Report (Hexham)

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of 29 constituents in the Hexham constituency on home education.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Hexham parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000460]

Badman Report (Hemel Hempstead)

10.31 pm

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Hemel Hempstead parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000439]

Badman Report (Ashford)

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Ashford parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000464]

Badman Report (Brighton Pavilion)

David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud to present a petition on behalf of 49 constituents in Brighton, Pavilion.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Brighton Pavilion parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000462]

Badman Report (Eddisbury)

10.32 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of Eddisbury constituents. Five are numbered on the petition.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Eddisbury parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000471]

Badman Report (Guildford)

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of approximately 70 residents of Guildford who are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Guildford parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000469]

Badman Report (Preseli Pembrokeshire)

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I, too, should like to present a petition on behalf of 37 of my constituents on the subject of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of residents in the Preseli Pembrokeshire parliamentary constituency and others,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000468]

Badman Report (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I should like to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross on the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated

at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000461]

Badman Report (Orpington)

Mr. John Horam (Orpington) (Con): My petition is on behalf of residents of Orpington and Bromley.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Orpington parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000473]

Badman Report (South West Bedfordshire)

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of 16 of my constituents in respect of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the South West Bedfordshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000477]

Badman Report (Wimbledon)

10.33 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Wimbledon.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wimbledon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000475]

Badman Report (East Surrey)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of some 90 my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the East Surrey parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000478]

Equitable Life (Carshalton and Wallington)

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I should like to present two petitions on behalf of residents of Carshalton and Wallington. The first is on Equitable Life.

Following is the full text of the petition.

[The Petition of residents of the constituency of Carshalton and Wallington in the Surrey region of England regarding the Government's response to the Parliamentary Ombudsman's reports on Equitable Life.

Declares that the Petitioners either are or they represent or support members, former members or personal representatives of deceased members of the Equitable Life Assurance Society who have suffered maladministration leading to injustice, as found by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in her report upon Equitable Life, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 16 July 2008 and bearing reference number HC 815; and further declares that the Petitioners or those whom they represent or support have suffered regulatory failure on the part of the public bodies responsible from the year 1992 onwards, but have not received compensation for the resulting losses and outrage.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000482]

Badman Report (Carshalton and Wallington)

Tom Brake: My second petition is on behalf of home educators in Carshalton and Wallington, on their concerns about the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Carshalton and Wallington parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000481]

Badman Report (Huntingdon)

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of eight constituents of the Huntingdon constituency regarding the recommendations made in the report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Huntingdon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000463]

Badman Report (Wellingborough)

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Wellingborough.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wellingborough parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000484]

Badman Report (Woking)

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of 75 residents of the Woking constituency.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Woking parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000487]

Badman Report (Macclesfield)

10.34 pm

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of a number of residents of the Macclesfield constituency, strongly opposed to the ill-judged recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Macclesfield parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000495]

Badman Report (Chipping Barnet)

Mrs. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of home educators in the Chipping Barnet constituency, expressing their concerns about the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Chipping Barnet parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000485]

Badman Report (Manchester, Withington)

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 29 of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Manchester, Withington parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due

[Mr. John Leech]

consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000492]

Badman Report (Cotswold)

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 45 of my constituents, protesting at the proposals in the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Cotswold parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000497]

Badman Report (North East Milton Keynes)

10.35 pm

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): I would like to present two petitions. The first is on behalf of 25 of my own constituents. The second petition is on behalf of six constituents of Mr. Speaker.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the North East Milton Keynes parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000501]

Badman Report (Buckingham)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Buckingham parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000500]

Badman Report (Bromsgrove)

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 35 home educators in the Bromsgrove constituency, opposed to the proposals in the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Bromsgrove parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory

annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000503]

Badman Report (High Peak)

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): I have been asked to present a petition of 22 names on behalf of the constituents from High Peak.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the High Peak parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000506]

Badman Report (Walthamstow)

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 70 constituents of Walthamstow on the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Walthamstow parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000505]

Badman Report (Fareham)

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 23 of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Fareham parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000474]

Badman Report (South West Hertfordshire)

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 53 of my constituents on the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the South West Hertfordshire parliamentary constituency,

[Mr. David Gauke]

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000508]

Badman Report (Congleton)

10.36 pm

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of 29 residents of Congleton, opposing the proposals in the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Congleton parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000507]

Badman Report (North East Hampshire)

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): This is a petition on behalf of 39 residents of North-East Hampshire.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the North East Hampshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000509]

Badman Report (Chesham and Amersham)

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I would like to present a petition from Chesham and Amersham on behalf of approximately 100 constituents objecting to the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Chesham and Amersham parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000504]

Badman Report (North Wiltshire)

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to present a petition on behalf of the people of North Wiltshire, a modest but important 15 of them, who are equally against the proposals in the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the North Wiltshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000512]

Badman Report (Hazel Grove)

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am pleased to submit a petition on behalf of seven of my constituents in the same terms.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Hazel Grove parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000510]

Badman Report (Vauxhall)

10.37 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am very happy to present a petition on behalf of 39 of my constituents expressing their views on the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Vauxhall parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000528]

Badman Report (Enfield Southgate)

Mr. David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I am very pleased to present a petition on behalf of 30 residents in Enfield, Southgate against the recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Enfield Southgate parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000525]

Badman Report (Croydon Central)

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): In presenting a petition on behalf of 32 residents of Croydon, Central, I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) on co-ordinating this mass presentation of petitions.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Croydon Central parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000519]

Badman Report (Regent's Park and Kensington North)

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): I would like to present a petition of 17 home educators in Regent's Park and Kensington, North.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Regents Park and Kensington North parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000527]

Badman Report (Wokingham)

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I would like to present a petition against the Badman report on behalf of 41 names, presented to me by the constituents of Wokingham.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wokingham parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000521]

Badman Report (Berwick-upon-Tweed)

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I am very happy to present a petition on behalf of 42 residents of the Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency, expressing their concerns about the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Berwick-upon-Tweed parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated

at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000522]

Badman Report (Bristol North-West)

10.38 pm

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North-West) (Lab/Co-op): As others have this evening, I would like to present a petition of 53 persons resident in the Bristol, North-West parliamentary constituency who are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Bristol North West parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000523]

Badman Report (Stroud)

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to present a petition on behalf of 147 of my constituents in the same vein as those of other Members.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Stroud parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000524]

Badman Report (North East Bedfordshire)

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am delighted to present a petition on behalf of a dozen good and true people of the glorious constituency of North-East Bedfordshire.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the North East Bedfordshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000541]

Badman Report (Crewe and Nantwich)

Mr. Edward Timpson (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I wish to present a petition on behalf of 33 of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Crewe and Nantwich parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the

[Mr. Edward Timpson]

data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P0003540]

Badman Report (Tewkesbury)

10.39 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 25 of my Tewkesbury constituents, who are concerned about recommendations in the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Tewkesbury parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P0003542]

Badman Report (Torbay)

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): I wish to present a petition on behalf of 22 constituents and others from Torbay and south Devon.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Torbay parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P0003543]

Badman Report (Henley on Thames)

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I would like to present a petition for 21 residents of Henley.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Henley on Thames parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P0003480]

Badman Report (Cities of London and Westminster)

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I should like to present this petition on behalf of 55 people from the Cities of London and Westminster constituency.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Cities of London and Westminster parliamentary constituency and others,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000544]

Badman Report (Broxbourne)

Mr. Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I should like to present my petition on behalf of 29 people from the constituency of Broxbourne expressing their concerns about the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Broxbourne parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000545]

Badman Report (Witney)

10.40 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): I should like—

[Interruption.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. If the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) is not going to present a petition, perhaps he could either leave the Chamber or contain himself.

Tony Baldry: I should like to present a petition on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron). I associate myself with the terms of the petition.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Witney parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000547]

Badman Report (North Shropshire)

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I would like to present a petition from a large number of constituents across North Shropshire, led by Mr. and Mrs. Hardy from Market Drayton, who are deeply concerned about the iniquitous recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the North Shropshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to

[Mr. Owen Paterson]

ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000538]

Badman Report (Newbury)

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I should like to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of 18 constituents of the Newbury constituency.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Newbury parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are 'concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000472]

Badman Report (Wantage)

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is my honour and privilege to present a petition on behalf of 36 constituents of mine—that is just the tip of the iceberg—objecting to the Badman report in the terms already put forward.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wantage parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000516]

Badman Report (Kettering)

10.40 pm

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of 22 residents of the Kettering constituency objecting in the same terms to the recommendations in the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Kettering parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000533]

Badman Report (Staffordshire Moorlands)

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): I am delighted to present a petition of 121 names from the constituency of Staffordshire, Moorlands protesting about the recommendations of the Badman report. I am delighted to have met several of the children involved when they presented the petition to me.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Staffordshire Moorlands parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that

the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England, but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000534]

Badman Report (Wycombe)

10.41 pm

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of five of my constituents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wycombe parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000533]

Badman Report (East Devon)

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): It is my honour to present a petition on behalf of 69 constituents of voicing their concerns about the contents of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the East Devon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000531]

Badman Report (Barnsley Central)

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central) (Lab): I should like to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of five of my constituents from Barnsley, Central.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Barnsley Central parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000550]

Badman Report (Richmond Park)

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of eight of the constituents of Richmond Park.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[Susan Kramer]

[The Petition of persons resident in the Richmond Park parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000549]

Badman Report (Selly Oak)

10.42 pm

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am presenting a petition on behalf of 37 households in the constituency of Birmingham, Selly Oak who are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of thepetition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Selly Oak parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000548]

Badman Report (Brent East)

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): I should like to present two petitions on behalf of 40 residents of Brent, East and Brent, South about the Badman report in the same terms as the previous petitioners.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Brent East parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000553]

Badman Report (Brent South)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Brent South parliamentary constituency and others,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000552]

Badman Report (Tunbridge Wells)

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of 26 residents of the Tunbridge Wells constituency.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Tunbridge Wells parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000551]

Badman Report (South Norfolk)

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): I should like to present in the same terms a petition on behalf of 87 constituents who are concerned about the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the South Norfolk parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000554]

Badman Report (Wealden)

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): I am delighted to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of 68 of my constituents who are similarly concerned about the recommendations of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Wealden parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000499]

Badman Report (Leominster)

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): I should like to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of the home educators of the Leominster constituency.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Leominster parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000569]

Badman Report (South Cambridgeshire)

10.43 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I wish to present a petition on the Badman report from eight constituents in the same terms.

I would also like to present a petition relating to Equitable Life from four constituents, also in like terms to other Members.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the South Cambridgeshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000564]

Equitable Life (South Cambridgeshire)

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying in full with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000563]

Badman Report (Southend West)

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): I wish to present a petition on behalf of a number of concerned residents in Southend, West in the same terms as everyone else.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Southend West parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000571]

Badman Report (Havant)

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I should like to present a petition on behalf of 15 home educators in Havant who are very concerned about the Government's proposals in the Badman report on home education.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Havant parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000565]

Badman Report (Epping Forest)

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of 62 of the people who live in the Epping Forest constituency who are furious about the implications of the Badman report.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Epping Forest Parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory

annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000562]

Badman Report (Windsor)

10.44 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I enthusiastically present a petition from 56 residents of the Windsor constituency concerning the Badman review.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Windsor parliamentary constituency and others,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000539]

Badman Report (Arundel)

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of the home educators of Arundel and South Downs, who are as furious about this as those of my hon. Friends and many hon. Members in all parts of the House. I believe that the Government should take notice of the strength of feeling on this issue and the numbers of hon. Members who have presented petitions this evening.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in Arundel,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000599]

Flooding (West Cumbria)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

10.44 pm

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): I begin by paying my own tribute to PC Bill Barker, who lost his life in the recent floods that affected west Cumbria. Few of us, if any, can know what the Barker family are going through right now. It is a difficult subject to talk about, but following PC Barker's ultimate sacrifice and the incredibly moving farewell given to him by his family, Cumbria constabulary and the people of Egremont recently, he still occupies the thoughts of our whole community. He gave his life in saving the lives of others, and he did instinctively something that many of us either would not or could not do. His sacrifice provides a definition of heroism for all of us.

After all the tributes, given by people from the Prime Minister to the heir to the throne, it is the tributes of PC Barker's wife, children and colleagues that dominate all others in our memory. He was a devoted father and husband and extraordinary friend, a supremely committed police officer and a man who elicited a rare combination of love and respect from those who knew him. He gave all that he had for the people he served and he will for ever be remembered by our community, and I should like to give him a simple thank you.

The Minister will know that the towns of Workington, Keswick and Cockermouth and the areas around them were most seriously affected by the recent flooding. In Workington and Cockermouth, we have seen devastation that is uncommon in west Cumbria, with streets swept away, homes ruined, businesses badly affected and lives placed on hold. As Alan Irving of the *Whitehaven News* observed, the whole community of west Cumbria came together in the wake of the floods. Rivalries were abandoned and the principles of community were reaffirmed across the whole of our county, with people in Whitehaven, Egremont and elsewhere showing incredible solidarity with their flooded neighbours.

On the Friday night after the floods hit, I stood in the Cockermouth sheep and wool centre helping as best I could, as deputy Regional Minister. I was moved to see my constituents fetching what food, clothing, toiletries and blankets they could to help the people of Cockermouth and Workington who were stationed there. They saw that as their job and duty, and it is typical of the people of west Cumbria that they should have done so.

There are many thank yous and stories from the days when the floods hit, and we will tell them for a long time, but I should like to give a special mention to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham). As a Government Whip, he cannot take part in these debates, but his constituents know what he did on the Thursday night as the rain kept coming in, the work that he threw himself into on the Friday morning when the devastation became apparent, and up to this very day. I am proud to have him as a neighbour and to work alongside him on so many issues, and I am grateful that many of my friends and family who live in his constituency have him as their MP. We were in constant contact as the disaster unfolded, and I know what he did in the midst of that chaos. No one could have done more, from ensuring that some of his constituents had the rubbish skips that they needed to going himself to buy nappies for the child of a young mother who was in desperate need and did not know where else to turn.

The rapid attendance and full attention of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was incredibly important. Their solidarity with us in our time of crisis was unprompted and genuine, and I am grateful for the unprecedented suspension of the Bellwin scheme and the Government's commitment to meeting 100 per cent. of the costs. The Government have confirmed that the rate of payment under the scheme, which provides financial support to local authorities in the event of an emergency, will be set at 100 per cent. in Cumbria rather than the standard 85 per cent. The Prime Minister has also made it clear that the costs of building the temporary bridge in Workington, the Barker crossing, will be met in full by the Department for Transport. I am told that the Department will also contribute other short-term resources to help the county implement the highways recovery plan, to ensure that all affected parts of the county are back in working order as soon as possible.

It must be said that Cumbria police, Cumbria county council, Cumbria fire and rescue service, the local NHS, the Environment Agency, animal welfare charities, BT, utility companies, our magnificent armed forces and many others acted in superb concert as the floods hit. Radio Cumbria became an irreplaceable service, almost immediately demonstrating the value and strength of public service broadcasting, which no other organisation could provide. Border Television was also very impressive.

As I went around the flooded areas, it became clear to me after a number of conversations, particularly in Keswick, just how vital the mountain rescue teams had been. They undoubtedly made the difference between life and death for many, and those incredible volunteers deserve our support and public money. In areas such as Cumbria, they are a vital emergency service. I have made the case before, as have my hon. Friends the Members for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) and for Workington, and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—he is a passionate advocate for the mountain rescue teams in our county and it is a pleasure to see him here—for removing the taxes on mountain rescue teams in England. That case is irrefutable, and I urge the Government to do that in addition to reimbursing the cost of the damage and destroyed equipment that was caused by the floods.

Away from the heavily hit areas, many other towns and villages in west Cumbria were affected by the flooding. In some quarters, they have been referred to as the forgotten flooded—places such as Parton, Cleator, Holmrook, Bootle, Egremont, Lorton and elsewhere. Those areas thankfully did not witness the same devastation as Workington and Cockermouth, but they continue to endure real suffering that is equally deserving of Government resources and support, which must be forthcoming. I have seen the effects of the flooding on those communities for myself. None must be left behind. Ultimately, the costs of recovery are not yet fully known, and it is going to take more and not less public money to put things right.

At this point, I pay a special tribute to a Copeland borough councillor, David Banks. When the banks of the River Ehen burst and houses were being flooded, he

went to the aid of some elderly people in his patch. He actually rebuilt—or tried to rebuild—a river bank with stones with his bare hands as the rain kept coming. That is the kind of people we are in west Cumbria, and the kind of public servants we need.

As the people of Parton taught me four years ago, it takes only a little bit of water to cause a flood and to have a huge impact on the life of a family. A foot of water can ruin a home and destroy treasured and irreplaceable possessions such as invaluable photographs and mementos of children and loved ones. Floods take away so much that can never be replaced.

Flooding is one of the most difficult issues facing the nation. It is likely to happen more, not less—we saw flooding in Carlisle in 2005—and we need to be able to meet the practical and policy challenges it poses, and I shall come soon to what those solutions may be very soon. After the media circus has moved on, as it now has, and when the drama has passed, we are left dealing with the reconstruction, and I seek assurance tonight that the solidarity and support of the Government will remain with the people of west Cumbria and the communities I have spoken about for as long as we need it. To put it bluntly, first, we must win the peace as well as the war.

Secondly, we need to look hard at the insurance industry in this country and the practices it deploys in such events. Tonight is not a night to point the finger of blame, but it is an opportunity to seek to further our understanding of what happens in the event of flooding. In particular, I hope the Government will help local businesses to derive at least some benefit from natural disasters such as those we have witnessed recently in west Cumbria.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I endorse everything the hon. Gentleman says, including his support for the emergency services and his call for infrastructure support for the county. Will he comment briefly on the need for Government support for the tourism industry across Cumbria? Quite understandably, the message was put out that Cumbria was closed for business and off limits. Many parts of the tourism industry have seen a drop in their income in the past two or three weeks of up to 70 per cent., but were not flooded. Does he agree that some Government money needs to go into promoting the tourism industry across Cumbria, so that it too can recover quickly?

Mr. Reed: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I must say that one reason why we brought him very quickly into the Regional Minister's council was that he is such a passionate and effective advocate for the people he represents in this place. He made his point as effectively in the council as he makes it tonight, and I agree with him. I understand the Secretary of State from the relevant Department will be visiting Cumbria on Thursday. Like the hon. Gentleman, I will be putting that case to the Secretary of State, and I thank him for making it tonight.

We must look at the insurance industry and the practices involved, and ensure that local businesses can benefit from natural disasters such as those we have seen and experienced. That means we must pressurise insurance companies to prioritise local businesses and trades when insurance-funded reconstruction work is necessary. A move such as this would not only mean that businesses could start work quickly—delay is often a critical factor—but would help to boost local economies that have been badly harmed by the flooding. We need to look at changing the current system. Experience in Carlisle has shown us—I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle for sharing his experience with us—that there was a real appetite for local, accountable, contactable building companies, rather than ones that appear out of nowhere overnight and then disappear without a trace. Some specialist work will need to be undertaken by specialist companies, but most of it can be undertaken by local providers. In areas of flood recovery, the local economy is often badly hit, and this is one way in which the economy can be helped to recover quickly. If insurers will not change their arrangements, the Government should look at changing those arrangements for them.

Thirdly, we need to examine our local coastal and river flood defences and improve them where necessary, as quickly as possible. West Cumbria clearly requires new flood defence measures similar to those in place in Carlisle, which worked so well as the rains hit. We need to make sure that the necessary measures are in place in waterways, roads and rivers such as the Ehen, the Irt and the Greta so that the chances of the structural chaos caused by such rainfall ever happening again are reduced significantly. Sadly, they can never be eliminated completely.

Fourthly, our road network requires serious attention, particularly the A66 and the A595. The A595 south of Calderbridge should never have been de-trunked. My community has never accepted this decision and the assumptions upon which this decision was made are now redundant given the worsening weather conditions and the fact that west Cumbria is set to once again become an international centre of excellence for the nuclear industry. Fifthly, our farmers need real help, not just now, but in the future, and I cannot stress that enough. Sixthly, we must assess what has happened to our water drainage systems since privatisation. We must determine accountability and responsibility and we must allocate resources where necessary to ensure that the network in place is sufficient to cope with events such as this, insofar as that is possible.

None of these things will happen overnight, but I know that they are necessary, I trust that the Government share our understanding of these needs and I trust that we can now begin the reconstruction effort apace. As a proud west Cumbrian, I know that we will come through this stronger and better equipped for the future. I stress that Cumbria is well and truly open for business—our hotels, hostelries and tourist attractions—and there is no finer place to be in the winter, summer, spring or autumn than Cumbria and west Cumbria in particular. I urge people to come and spend their Christmas holidays there.

10.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) on securing this timely debate on an important subject. I thank him for the role that he played as deputy Regional Minister for the North West. I am also grateful to other hon. Members representing the area

[Huw Irranca-Davies]

for their work in supporting the families, businesses and communities that were and still are affected so deeply. I endorse the remarks that he made about our hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) and other MPs and their tireless work during that time, and I join him in the tribute that he paid to PC Bill Barker. I extend my sympathy—and, I am sure, that of the whole House—to PC Barker's family and friends.

It is worth recalling the sheer scale of the traumatic weather incident that befell the people of Cumbria in those few days. The Met Office tells us that, in Cumbria, 372.4 mm of rain fell at Seathwaite and 361.4 mm of rain fell at Honister between 8 am on Wednesday 18 November and 4 am on Friday 20 November. Provisionally, the 24-hour total at Seathwaite of 314.4 mm is a UK record for a single location in any given 24-hour period.

Thanks to the expertise of the Met Office, we could see that severe weather was coming that week. On Monday 16 November, the Met Office issued an advisory notice of severe weather in western Britain for Thursday 19 November. That was upgraded on Tuesday 17 November to an early warning of severe weather for parts of north-west England and south-west Scotland. That too was upgraded on Wednesday 18 November to an early warning of extreme weather in Cumbria and south-west Scotland.

In addition to good forecasting, we had for the first time during a major flooding incident the expertise and experience of the new flood forecasting centre, which was established by the Government in April. The centre provides a unique service, with Met Office forecasters and Environment Agency hydrologists working side-by-side and giving emergency responders a longer lead-time to prepare for and respond to flooding. Their work was quite staggering. I was there in advance of the extreme weather that hit and saw the collaborative work done and the value that it added to accurate and timely forecasting, enabling the centre to send out advance flood warnings and to respond on the ground well in advance. It played a significant role.

The centre also played an important role in providing emergency responders with early guidance on the rainfall forecast, as well as expert advice on the flood risk impacts. Indeed, 36 hours before the flooding occurred, the flood forecasting centre indicated a high risk of significant property flooding and extreme danger to life in Cumbria via its flood guidance statement and through rolling telephone conferences.

Of course, we recognise that, despite good preparation by government, the many agencies involved and the responders on the ground, such severe weather brings tragedy. As we have said, we all mourn the loss of PC Bill Barker, whom the Prime Minister rightly described as a very heroic and brave man. It is fitting that the new footbridge in Workington has PC Barker's name forever attached to it.

I know that we have done so before in the House, but it would be wrong not to say again how indebted we are to the many individuals and organisations—too many to go through again—that showed such heroism, bravery, care and consideration for those whose lives, homes and businesses were threatened by the floods. All who were involved in the emergency response deserve the highest praise. I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland rightly highlighting the role of the mountain rescue teams. I am sure that his words will have been heard and noted by other Ministers.

Attention is now rightly focused on helping the affected communities to return to normal as quickly as possible. That work involves many organisations, locally, regionally and nationally. One of the great benefits of the response in those difficult times was the joined-up work across government, agencies and volunteers on the ground. Cumbria county council has put in place local recovery arrangements and has been using the recovery plan developed following the Carlisle floods in 2005. A recovery co-ordinating group has been set up and is meeting regularly. It involves the county council, the three district councils most directly affected—Allerdale, Copeland and South Lakeland—the Health Protection Agency, the Environment Agency, the Government office, the police and the chairs of the sub-groups covering business and economic recovery, health and welfare, environment and infrastructure. We have learned from what has gone before and tried to make our preparations for rescue and recovery far better.

My hon. Friend is rightly keen to ensure that Cumbria benefits from the significant investment that the Government have made, and are making, in managing flood risks. As he will know, spending across government has doubled over the past 10 years, and we are investing a record £2.15 billion over the current three-year spending period. In fact, one of the signal successes in traditional river defences was the result of investing more than £30 million in the Carlisle defences. Those defences held. I pay tribute to the contractors commissioned by the Environment Agency to fill in the remaining 20 per cent. at short notice and in desperate circumstances. Those temporary infills held and saved many homes and possibly lives.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle) (Lab): One of the homes that they saved that night was mine. I and my neighbours were out until 2 o'clock in the morning working with the contractors, who worked for 24 hours non-stop. To be honest, we had very little help from the district council, but with the contractors' help we managed to save not only the houses, but the biscuit factory that employs 1,200 people.

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Heroic efforts were made by all concerned to avoid the worst. The impact could have been far worse than what we saw, bad as that was.

Cockermouth, Keswick and Ulverston have all benefited from investment and more is planned. In Keswick, for example, the Environment Agency has done a study to justify improvement works and has allocated funding to design works in 2010-11 for construction at an estimated cost of £5 million. For Ulverston, funding has been allocated in 2010-11 to develop a scheme for Dragley beck, which is programmed for construction in 2011-12 at a cost of £2 million. That project would raise the existing one-in-20-year standard of flood protection to one in 70 years. For Cockermouth, indicative funding is in place to begin studying a potential scheme in 2012-13.

We have already seen what good investment can achieve in places such as Carlisle, where some 3,000 properties were saved from flooding, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) said. In Appleby,

a flood action group was set up in 2005. The residents of The Sands, which has no formal flood defences, have taken advantage of the DEFRA property-level flood resilience grant scheme to install flood-resilient and resistance measures on their individual properties, the cost of which averages out at about £2,000 a property. Forty-six properties were protected from flooding by those simple, easy and cost-effective measures.

We need to tackle the problem at all levels. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland has rightly made it clear that we do not focus just on the larger communities in west Cumbria. There is a long list of projects in Cumbria for which the Environment Agency has identified an indicative allocation of expenditure. In his constituency, they include projects at Nor beck in Cleator moor, Skirting beck, Low Mill and the River Ehen in Egremont. The provision of community flood defences in those locations is subject to the necessary project appraisal, as always, to find solutions that are technically, economically and socially acceptable.

Mr. Jamie Reed: During my time in this place I have found that one of the most important things about flooding is to listen to those who are repeatedly affected by it. Can my hon. Friend give me an assurance that the relevant Departments and the Environment Agency will listen to the representations that I make on behalf of the various flood action groups, such as Keswick flood action group and Parton flood action group? People who have experienced flooding know where it strikes and what its effects are. That is important.

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. One of the lessons that we have learnt from previous flooding incidents is about the need to listen to people on the ground who have been affected. I can give that commitment to him as a constituency MP and in his role as the deputy Minister for the North West, and to other Members who are affected. We are keen to keep talking, as the weeks and months roll by, about what the experience has been and what we can learn. Even though the response on this occasion was far better than what we saw before, as I have highlighted and as is generally accepted, I have no doubt that there are lessons to be learned. We need to get better every time.

Let me talk about the fairly sizeable package of support that is now being made available in various areas. The Department for Transport will fund the bridge and road repairs, in line with its emergency funding scheme. The £1 million community recovery fund announced by the Prime Minister and supplied and managed by the Department for Communities and Local Government will be for local authorities to use as they see fit in assisting those local residents and businesses affected. The North West Development Agency opened its £1 million flood recovery grant scheme on Wednesday 25 November. The NDWA is also investing in a further £100,000 to push the message that Cumbria is ready to welcome visitors after the floods.

The Communities and Local Government Secretary has announced that the Bellwin scheme for local authorities for emergency clear-up costs and temporary accommodation will be set at 100 per cent. above threshold, rather than 85 per cent. Department for Work and Pensions' social fund community care grants are available for people on qualifying benefits to meet the cost of replacing essential household items, and crisis loans are also available. I pay tribute to the local community fund that has been organised by volunteer groups on the ground. It is absolutely astonishing how they have been able to mobilise that charitable support in such a short time, and they deserve support.

My hon. Friend referred to the use of local building contractors, which is a salient point. They can be used to carry out the drying and repair of buildings affected by the flooding. I am glad to say that this matter has been taken up by the county council and others, including Ministers, and by the Association of British Insurers, whose representatives I have met in the past few days. We are staying engaged with the ABI, and—to give credit where it is due—it is fair to say that it has been quick to respond to events by issuing advice to people who have suffered flood damage. The association has urged people to contact their insurers as soon as possible and confirmed that the first priority for insurers must be to ensure that every claim is dealt with as quickly as possible and do everything that they can to help customers to recover.

In selecting builders, insurance companies will, of course, want to know that they have the capability and expertise to provide what is needed to do the job right. They have panels of specialist builders to enable them to react quickly to any event—as they conspicuously did after previous flood events. I assure my hon. Friend that some on those panels will be undoubtedly drawn from local contractors, or will use subcontracted labour within the area. At this stage in the recovery process, insurers are using specialist drying-out and stripping-out contractors, and I understand that some of them are local.

My hon. Friend and other MPs representing the area have mentioned the importance of having some choice in these matters. In the longer term, and when rebuilding starts, it will be open to those affected to choose their own builders, and insurance companies will manage them through the process. Should they do that, some of the risk will ultimately fall on the policyholder, because quality and price cannot be guaranteed in the same way. It is therefore very important that people get the right builders in, but having that choice is important.

The Government have been working hard and consistently to provide better, more sustainable management of flood risk for people, homes and businesses. We have been responding vigorously to Sir Michael Pitt's recommendations arising from the 2007 floods, not least through the Flood and Water Management Bill that will shortly come before the House. In relation to streamlining and accountability, the Bill will give the authorities that manage flood risk better powers to do so, putting local authorities in charge of dealing with local flood risk and the Environment Agency in clear charge of overseeing flooding and coastal erosion nationally. That clarity is important, and it flows from Sir Michael Pitt's recommendations. However, it will not remove the need for local authorities and the Environment Agency to work closely together on the ground. The events in Cumbria signally demonstrate how effective such joined-up working can be in protecting livelihoods and property.

The rainfall and the resulting flooding in Cumbria last month were an extreme event, but none of us can be in any doubt that we will face similar challenges in the future. The latest UK climate projections that the

[Huw Irranca-Davies]

Government published in June this year suggest that winter rainfall totals are likely to increase by 20 to 30 per cent. for much of England and Wales. While we cannot say that this event was caused by climate change, we can say with certainty that such events are consistent with the predictions for climate change and are going to occur more frequently, so we must learn the lessons.

We must also continue to build on the community-based and multi-agency approach to planning for, responding to and recovering from flooding events. The people of west Cumbria, and the many organisations that helped them, have done a great deal to show us just what can be achieved by pulling together.

11.14 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

House of Commons

Wednesday 9 December 2009

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Third Sector Recession Action Plan

1. **Anne Milton** (Guildford) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the third sector recession action plan. [304978]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): The Government recognise the extraordinary role the sector plays in helping vulnerable people through the recession. That is why we have given unprecedented help and support to the sector, both through existing programmes and through the £42.5 million "Real help now" programme, the community action plans and the £16.7 million hardship fund. That money is getting out there right now: the programmes have already provided £32 million-worth of assistance to a total of 1,546 organisations. Evaluations of all our major recession programmes are already under way, and reports will be produced from the middle of next year.

Anne Milton: I wonder whether the Minister is aware that charities helping those with mental health problems, such as Oakleaf Enterprise and the YMCA in my Guildford constituency, are facing a massive downturn in income. Instead of the "laser-targeted" package of help the Government's press release described in February, we have the usual lumbering, bureaucratic, red-tape nightmare so commonly seen from this Government.

Angela E. Smith: I am sur[illegible] the hon. Lady's comments, and if she wants t[illegible]mples, I will be happy to look at them, because we have tried very hard to minimise the amount of red tape. Indeed, on the hardship fund in particular, we have been praised for the swiftness of our assessment of applications. Obviously, we want to ensure that charities and organisations who need help can get it quickly, and it is impressive that £32 million has already gone out to help them.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): For a number of charities that I work with, there is a bit of a mixed picture. Some of the larger ones have seen their giving going up, but those that I call secondary charities—those that rely on the bigger charities to give them money—are often struggling the most. For example, I met representatives of SPEAK on Monday, and they are struggling to get money from others charities. What assistance can these programmes provide to help those charities that fund other charities, so that we can make sure that the money flows through the system and that secondary charities are not disenfranchised from these programmes?

Angela E. Smith: We have sought to put in place a range of programmes to help charities and voluntary organisations in a variety of ways. In terms of those organisations to which my hon. Friend refers, may I direct him to the grassroots grants programme, as the often quite small donations given under that programme to bodies delivering services at the grass-roots level can be extremely valuable? Those grants range from £500 to £5,000 and are issued through the Community Development Foundation. I will also ensure that my hon. Friend has information on all the grants and packages of help that are available to help charities of different sizes.

Jenny Willott (Cardiff, Central) (LD): The hardship fund, for charities with a turnover above £200,000, is a key part of the action plan, but the recent decision of the Office of the Third Sector to divert into it £750,000 from the campaigning research programme, which is aimed at smaller charities, has caused outcry across the sector. Does the Minister share my concern that the lack of consultation, or even warning, ahead of that decision has not only damaged the charities directly affected, but has shaken the confidence of the sector as a whole in the Government's commitment to the compact and their support for smaller organisations?

Angela E. Smith: Yes, I certainly understand the concerns about the transfer of the money. It is nothing to do with the size of the organisations; rather, it is to do with the purpose of the fund. It was a difficult decision to make, particularly because it is not compact-compliant, which I regret and apologise for. We should consider the purpose of the fund, however. When I was travelling around the country talking to different organisations, what came up time and again was that organisations delivering services on the ground at grass-roots level were being hit by the recession and needed help. We could have spent this £750,000 either on campaigning research or on helping those organisations. While it was a difficult choice, the basic decision was sound. However, I apologise to those who have been affected, and for this isolated breach of the compact.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the effectiveness with which the hardship fund has been got out to organisations throughout the country, but does she think that the smallest organisations are sufficiently aware of, and therefore taking advantage of, the available help?

Angela E. Smith: I do in some ways, as many organisations have had the help and have been able to make use of it. I think that more can be done, however, and I appeal to all Members to make organisations in their constituencies aware of the grants, support and loans that are available. We want that money to get out to third sector organisations because they are often the

glue in communities, providing support on the ground to the people who most need it. We must do as much as we can to get that money out to them and to help and support them. May I direct my hon. Friend to the Government-funded National Council for Voluntary Organisations website, "Funding central", which has all the information on grants and support? That is helpful to all organisations.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham) (Con): When the voluntary and charitable sector is facing horrendous pressure as a result of the Government's recession, how helpful is it for Lord Mandelson to be railroading through the removal of the sector's long-standing exemption on public performance rights? Does the Minister accept that adding at least £20 million in extra cost to voluntary and charitable organisations just now is the last thing that they need, or have the Government just stopped listening?

Angela E. Smith: It is not a case of the Government not listening, and I should also correct the right hon. Gentleman because it is not the Government's recession; as he may be aware, this has been an international recession, affecting countries across the world. I share concerns about the impact that charges from PPL and PRS could have on charitable and voluntary organisations; indeed, I met them to express those concerns on behalf of the sector. They are now working together to consider a plan to minimise that impact, and I urge all third sector organisations to contact PPL and PRS to ensure that it is minimised. The exemption was long-standing, and I believe that Britain is one of the last countries in Europe to lose it. I share the concern about the impact of this, and we must work with the entire third sector—the charities and the voluntary organisations—to do what we can to minimise it.

Mr. Maude: Part of the Government's much-vaunted recession action plan was an £8 million volunteer brokerage scheme, which was intended to create 40,000 volunteering opportunities. Has not that much-criticised scheme turned out to be a flop, with only 2,500 opportunities actually being created? Given that leaders in the sector have criticised the scheme as

"a numbers game...not suited to the work of many organisations",

has the Minister yet got the message that this sort of headline-catching initiative with rigid top-down targets is the problem, not the solution?

Angela E. Smith: It is probably too early to make such an assessment as to success or failure. An increasing number of people are going into placements; this process was slow to start and we are seeing some improvement now. It is important to have targets, because they create an ambition to ensure that we get as many people into placements as possible. For example, in August, 930 people on jobseeker's allowance took up placements on this scheme—that is important and it is success.

Social Inclusion

2. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of her Department's actions to promote social inclusion in Yorkshire. [304979]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): The social exclusion task force co-ordinates and monitors progress on tackling social exclusion across England. I am aware that in Yorkshire and the Humber a wide range of measures are in place to support more vulnerable adults into homes and jobs. I am also very pleased that Barnsley, Bradford and Rotherham are all sites for the "Inspiring Communities" programme, which will help to raise the aspirations of young people in deprived areas. May I also tell my hon. Friend that when I visited the York Council for Voluntary Service, I was very impressed by its commitment to promoting social inclusion?

Hugh Bayley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for visiting the CVS. Since York Credit Union opened three years ago, it has done an excellent job in helping people to get out of debt, but we still face a serious problem with door-to-door loan sharks. I am holding a credit agreement offered to one of my constituents, where the annual percentage rate of interest was 2,639,385.9 per cent. I am not making that figure up; it is written here in black and white. Will she speak to her colleagues in the Treasury and press for legislation to put to an end this kind of usury?

Hon. Members: Hear, Hear.

Angela E. Smith: As we can hear, the whole House is horrified by such an extortionate interest rate. We all share concerns about this, because it is often those on the lowest incomes who end up paying the highest prices because of the high cost of borrowing. I can tell my hon. Friend that the Office of Fair Trading is examining the issue and it issued an interim report yesterday. A final report will be available in the spring and the Government will consider its recommendations. As he has done, may I commend the work of credit unions, which provide a way of helping those who are financially excluded?

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Although I endorse what the hon. Member for City of York (Hugh Bayley) has just said, may I ask the Minister to acquire a copy of "The Complete Plain Words" by Sir Ernest Gowers, so that she can start talking in English and get rid of terms such as "social inclusion", "social exclusion" and "third sector", and all this gobbledegook, which separates the very people we are trying to help from this place?

Angela E. Smith: That is the first time I have ever been accused of talking gobbledegook; I think that people understand terms such as "socially included" and "socially excluded", and find them helpful. I have some sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says about the term "third sector" and if he could come up with a better one, that would be helpful. In some ways, I regard the "third sector"—the wider charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprise—as pretty much the first sector.

People with Disabilities

3. **Mr. Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of levels of access to voluntary activities for people with disabilities; and if she will make a statement. [304980]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Dawn Butler): The latest volunteering figures from the Government's citizenship survey show that in England 32 per cent. of disabled people volunteered at least once in 2008-09. In order to ensure that more disabled people are able to access volunteering programmes, the Office of the Third Sector is piloting a £2 million volunteering fund in England, which will pay for adjustments and support for disabled volunteers. The fund opened for applications on 16 November.

Mr. Tom Clarke: On the subject of diversity, may I be the first to congratulate my hon. Friend on being the first black woman ever to have spoken from the Dispatch Box? May I encourage her and her colleagues to work with excellent organisations such as Mencap and People First to ensure that people with learning disabilities are given the opportunity to play a full part in voluntary activity, which is both in their interests and the greater interest of society?

Ms Butler: I thank my right hon. Friend for his warm words and kind remarks. It is indeed a pleasure to be standing here at the Dispatch Box. I, too, would like to congratulate my right hon. Friend on receiving a disability champion award yesterday. The Cabinet Office is looking at ensuring that disabled people—those with learning difficulties—are totally included in the packages that we are providing, such as the £17.5 million Improving Reach programme. There have been successful bids for people with learning difficulties, such as those from Mind associations. These groups receive the award funding through Office of the Third Sector programmes, including v, grassroots grants, Futurebuilders and targeted support funds.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): May I obviously endorse the remarks of the right hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Mr. Clarke) about the new Minister and wish her well, albeit that it will perhaps be for a relatively short time? Will the Minister accept that for disabled people—whether they are mentally or physically disabled—to be able to participate in voluntary activities is critical to their quality of life. Is she concerned that at the present time, with the recession that we are experiencing, this group of people is suffering—they are unable to indulge in all the worthwhile activities that would make their lives profitable and well?

Ms Butler: I again thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The Office of the Third Sector is building a platform to ensure that people with disabilities participate fully and are considered to be the same as able-bodied people. The scheme that has been put in place, although it is a pilot, will be reviewed in 2011. If it is successful, it will be rolled out nationally.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that an important aspect of such work would be efforts to promote among younger people the concept of people with disabilities being more able to get involved in a range of voluntary activities, thereby helping the wider community, particularly across the demographics?

Ms Butler: The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point. Indeed, through programmes such as v and YouthNet, the Office of the Third Sector is ensuring that young people are not only working with and for, but are engaged with, people with disabilities—both those with learning disabilities and those with other disabilities—to ensure that they can play a full and active part in society.

Social Exclusion

4. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families on the establishment of a national assessment centre for early intervention policies to reduce social exclusion; and if she will make a statement. [304981]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): First, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on, and commitment to, this issue. I am aware that a number of places, including Nottingham, have developed early intervention policies to tackle social problems. It is important that the impact of individual policies is assessed. Officials from the Cabinet Office and the DCSF have discussed the best way of addressing this, including the role of a centre for excellence in outcomes.

Mr. Allen: There are now lots of green shoots of early intervention in the UK—not just in Nottingham but in Manchester, Glasgow, London and south Wales. I hope that my right hon. Friend will ensure that all those ideas are pulled together so that lots of local authorities that wish to embark on an early intervention programme have a strong, central evidence base from which to draw, rather than replicating individual projects. I hope that she will put her weight behind a national policy assessment centre.

Angela E. Smith: Yes. I know that my hon. Friend has raised this issue with the Prime Minister, too. There is no doubt that as more authorities get involved with early intervention it is very important that they can share best practice and understand what works best to get value for money. Departments will be discussing how best to achieve this, including the role that can be played by such a centre of excellence in outcomes.

Information Commissioner

5. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that material held by her Department which is requested by the Information Commissioner is provided promptly to the Commissioner. [304982]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): The Cabinet Office aims to respond to requests from the Information Commissioner for material required for an investigation in a timely fashion.

Mr. Prentice: I am not really happy with that answer. I want to know who is responsible for the grotesque delays in responding to my freedom of information request regarding Lord Ashcroft. Is it the Cabinet Office that is dragging its feet, or is it the Information Commissioner who is being dilatory and totally useless?

Angela E. Smith: I might not be able to answer that question in the way that my hon. Friend has invited me to, but I can tell him that the Information Commissioner has not issued an information notice regarding any request that he has made to the Cabinet Office.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): What follow-up does the Minister do with other Departments? I have just waited a year and a half to get an answer to an information request from the Department for Transport, and even now it has not been answered fully. Does she think that is too long to wait, or is that the sort of time line that I should expect?

Angela E. Smith: Freedom of information matters are dealt with by the Ministry of Justice, so I will draw the hon. Lady's concerns to the attention of ministerial colleagues at MOJ and ask them to take note of what she says.

Local Organisations (Funding)

6. **Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): How many local organisations have received grassroots grants from her Department in the last 12 months. [30493]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): The £130 million grassroots grants programme provides much-needed support to small voluntary groups that are doing vital work in our communities across England. In the first 14 months, there have been more than 13,000 grant awards to small charities and voluntary organisations totalling more than £33 million. I am delighted that in County Durham alone grassroots grants has invested more than £487,000 in small grants to local voluntary groups. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. As usual, there are far too many private conversations taking place on both sides of the Chamber. That is frankly discourteous and it conveys a very bad impression to those who are listening to our proceedings.

Phil Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some £51,000-worth of grassroots grants have gone to community groups in my constituency such as the Ferryhill 2000 committee, Fishburn kurling club and Thornley Homing club. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that shows the Government's commitment to local people and communities, and makes an important contribution to the front line?

Angela E. Smith: Yes, I do. There are often small community groups in communities doing first-class, important work. A small amount of money can make a huge difference to their impact on the local community, and that is why the Government have invested so much money in the grassroots grants programme, which gives grants ranging from £250 to £5,000 to small local groups. As some of us who speak to those groups know, that makes a real difference in those communities.

Mr. Nick Hurd (Ruislip-Northwood) (Con): In April, the Department launched a programme of grants for small campaigning charities. In October, it sent out grant letters offering the funding. In November, the Minister withdrew the money that had been promised without any consultation. Of course, that has generated real anger in the sector, because with that one decision, the Department that is meant to champion the sector has made a mockery of the compact and has sent out a signal that it is okay for public grant makers to treat charities in that shabby way. I welcome her apology today, but is she really aware of the damage that she has done, and what will she do to repair it?

Angela E. Smith: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman wrote his question before he heard the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott) raise this issue. I regret any damage that has been done, because it is important that people understand my commitment to the compact and to voluntary organisations. I refer him to my earlier comments. At this time of recession, and given the comments that have been made to me by organisations up and down the country, the priority had to be given to organisations that deliver services to communities on the front line. Having said that, I deeply regret the concerns that people have raised, and I assure him that my commitment to the compact is strong.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Often, when funding organisations are looking to provide grants to voluntary community organisations, they pay too much attention to the involvement of statutory bodies when they look at those organisations' financial viability. May I urge my right hon. Friend, when she is handing out grassroots grants, to ensure that the money is going to genuine grass-roots organisations in local communities?

Angela E. Smith: The grassroots grants programme is administered in constituencies on behalf of Government by the Community Development Foundation. I think that I can give my hon. Friend the reassurance he seeks on this matter, but I will send him a list of the organisations in his constituency that have received such grants so that he can make an assessment himself and talk to me further if he wishes to do so.

Government Statistics

7. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): When she next expects to meet the national statistician to discuss policy on publication of statistics by Government Departments. [30494]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): I meet the national statistician regularly once every three months, but I have no plans to discuss with her the policy on the publication of statistics by Government Departments. Departments are expected to follow the code of practice for official statistics that is maintained by the independent UK Statistics Authority.

Mr. Bellingham: I thank the Minister for that reply. The ONS has just published the results of the recent census rehearsal, with responses coming in at just 35 per cent., compared with 54 per cent. in 2001. Is not that a major warning sign that the new census is far too long, too intrusive and too much hassle to fill in? Surely the excessive cost of £450 million is totally unacceptable, given the country's parlous finances.

Angela E. Smith: I refute the hon. Gentleman's comments on a number of grounds. First, the census pilots are voluntary, and more resources have been invested to ensure that we get accurate and clear responses from

people up and down the country in the 2011 census, because we want the best information possible. Secondly, I also think that the cost of the census, which works out to 87p per person per year, is a reasonable amount to pay for the benefit that the census brings to the country.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the case that there needs to be public acceptability of the level of detail in the 2011 census? Has my hon. Friend had discussions with Jil Matheson about the level of disaggregated data that will be published, the timetable that will be associated with that, and whether full census form information will be published rather earlier than the present limit of 100 years?

Angela E. Smith: I have obviously had discussions with the ONS about ensuring public confidence in the census, although I have not had particular discussions about how long information will remain confidential. I think that 100 years is appropriate, but if my hon. Friend wants to write to me about the matter, I will look at it again.

2011 Census

8. **Mr. Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What her most recent estimate is of the cost of the 2011 census. [304987]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): The cost of the 2011 census in England and Wales is estimated at £482 million, as stated in the White Paper on the census published in December 2008. As I just mentioned, that equates to 87p per person per year.

Mr. Crabb: Is not the Government's failure over the last 10 years to monitor correctly the number of people coming into the country one reason why we are facing such an expensive census in 2011?

Angela E. Smith: I think that the hon. Gentleman struggled to find a point to make on this matter. What he suggests is not the case at all: in fact, a comparison of the cost of the census in this country with the cost of those conducted in other countries around the world shows that our census is much more reasonable. It costs about a third of the census in the US, and is significantly less than that conducted in New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Ireland and Scotland. The cost cannot be called excessive, so his point is completely unfounded.

Paul Rowen (Rochdale) (LD): Given the costs of the census, does the Minister think that including questions on a person's immigration status is a useful use of public funds, when that information can be collected more accurately by other means?

Angela E. Smith: On the issue of costs, the benefits to the Treasury from the information that it gets from the census amounts to the equivalent of around £700 million. That far exceeds the costs of the census, but the point that the hon. Gentleman makes is also not valid because the ONS chooses the questions independently. It looks at why the questions are needed, and the answers to them are used to ensure that the billions of pounds of public funds are disbursed on the basis of accurate information.

Floods

9. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the operation of the provisions of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 in relation to the recent floods in Cumbria. [304989]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Dawn Butler): I know that the hon. Lady recently visited the affected area to see for herself the impact of the flooding and to meet emergency responders. All sides of the House have paid tribute to PC Bill Barker, who lost his life.

Despite the unprecedented nature of the rainfall that occurred, the prompt and effective response to the flooding in Cumbria was exemplary, due to meticulous and effective preparation by local and national responders working through the framework set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. As part of the ongoing Civil Contingencies Act enhancement programme, we will ensure that any lessons that can be learned from events such as this are used to enhance our guidance even further, but tribute must be paid to those respondents who worked together during this time.

Miss McIntosh: Will the Minister join me in congratulating those wardens on the ground in Cumbria who were there knocking on doors and evacuating people, thanks to the warning? Obviously, we regret the loss of PC Barker. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 seems to be working, but we need more wardens of the type that we saw in Cumbria.

Ms Butler: The hon. Lady makes the valid point that we must congratulate those people and wardens on the ground, and I completely endorse her sentiments. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 has been working, and it provides a framework that has now been well established. We will continue to look at any lessons that can be learned from that and ensure that it is enhanced further.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Would the Minister like to congratulate the emergency services and the armed forces on the provision of the temporary bridge, which has made a real difference to the people of Workington?

Ms Butler: The emergency services and the armed forces worked exceptionally well and speedily in ensuring that the new bridge was built in time and to the benefit of all concerned, so I completely endorse my hon. Friend's sentiments.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [304963] **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): Before I list my engagements, it is with deep sorrow that we remember, from 1st Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment, Lance

Corporal Adam Drane, who died in Afghanistan on Monday. My thoughts and, I know, those of the whole House will be with his family and friends. Every life lost during this year and during previous years is a personal tragedy, and we mourn every single loss. We mourn heroes whose acts of bravery recognise that a more stable Afghanistan means a safer Britain, and the scale of their sacrifice does not diminish but strengthens our resolve.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Robert Neill: I am sure that the whole House would endorse the Prime Minister's tribute to the lance corporal, and endorse his sentiments as well.

Last week the Prime Minister told the House that Spain was in the G20 and that it had been in recession for longer than this country—neither of which, upon checking, turns out to be correct. Do we conclude from that that the pain in Spain is mainly in his brain?

The Prime Minister: I am very glad that we are starting this week's Question Time exactly as we ended last week's Question Time—*[Interruption]*—by talking about the economy. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We want to hear the Prime Minister's reply, and certainly people listening elsewhere wish to hear it. We will have no further interruptions.

The Prime Minister: There are some people who get into the White House on false pretences, get their photograph taken and do not have a formal invitation, but the Prime Minister of Spain was invited to the G20 by the President of America, to be part of the G20. I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that I invited the Prime Minister of Spain, Mr. Zapatero, to the G20 meeting that took place in London. Mr. Zapatero was at the G20 meeting that took place in Pittsburgh. In other words, Spain was part of the G20. *[Interruption.]* I know that the Opposition are going to talk down Britain, but it is bit much them talking down Spain.

Ms Angela C. Smith (Sheffield, Hillsborough) (Lab): The fatal attack last week on four-year-old John-Paul Massey from Merseyside again raises concerns about the effectiveness of legislation relating to dangerous dogs. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet, with me, a small delegation of those who are concerned about the issue to discuss what can be done?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This was a terrible death, and I am very sorry to learn about what happened to the little boy in Liverpool, John-Paul Massey. She knows that the police are continuing to investigate the circumstances of the death. They have also referred their handling of an original report from February 2009 to the Independent Police Complaints Commission. It would obviously be inappropriate to comment further on that instance, but the issue of the status of dangerous dogs was raised at the antisocial behaviour working party a few days ago. We are working with the Home Office to ensure that those who are on the front line make full use of the powers available to them to tackle the problem of dogs affecting communities. The Government have provided additional advice to the police, and funding to the Association of Chief Police Officers to help to train officers in dangerous dog legislation. This was an event that should not recur, and we will do everything in our power to make sure that it does not happen.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): May I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Lance Corporal Adam Drane, who was killed in Afghanistan on Monday? The 100th military casualty this year is a very sad milestone. We should honour his memory; we should help his family.

As the Prime Minister and I have both seen, when one speaks to our troops in Afghanistan, it is not sympathy and pity that they are after, but support, not just for what they are doing, but for the mission in which they are engaged. In my view, they are every bit the equal of those men who stormed the beaches of Normandy or who fought their way across Africa in the second world war, and we should be proud of what they are doing.

The new counter-insurgency strategy and the extra troops announced by America last week show that we have the last best chance to get this issue right. Does the Prime Minister agree that we simply cannot waste any time in getting every element of the strategy in place, including troops, helicopters, equipment, development aid, civilian co-ordination and, of course, the pressure on President Karzai to cut corruption?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased that the right hon. Gentleman was able to go to Afghanistan, and I also know that many Members have visited our troops in Afghanistan. I pay tribute to them for visiting our troops, but I pay greater tribute to our troops for the great work that they do.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we must move quickly. Our additional troops will be going to Afghanistan in the next few days. We have called a conference for 28 January in London, to bring together all the powers that are involved in Afghanistan—the 43-nation coalition. That will discuss—and, I hope, agree on—civil co-ordination. President Karzai has agreed to come, and he will have to report on the reforms that he promised to make in his Administration as he started his second period of duty. At the same time, we are making available all the equipment that is necessary—helicopters and vehicles—to our armed forces.

I can just add one thing—that 80 per cent. of the deaths have been the result of explosive devices. We have now brought in far more surveillance equipment; we have brought in extra engineers; we have brought in extra drones to survey the area; we have brought in more intelligence officers; and we are backing up our troops with the best equipment possible. We will do everything we can to avoid the loss of life as a result of this guerrilla warfare.

Mr. Cameron: US forces are now pouring into Helmand province, and that is welcome. But is not one of the current problems that British forces are still spread too thinly in the very tough parts of Helmand for which we are responsible? Following the increase in US forces in Helmand, is there not a danger that there will be a contrast between the UK forces, who are still spread too

thinly, and US forces, who will not be? Does the Prime Minister accept that this needs to change, and change very urgently?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman had heard what I said last week, he would know that I said that we were going to thicken the presence of our forces in a number of key areas. Of course operational decisions are a matter for commanders on the ground, but I think it is recognised that two things have got to happen: one is that we thicken our presence; the second thing, however, which I emphasise as part of our long-term strategy, is the fact that we are also there to train the Afghan forces so that they can take over. So 5,000 Afghan troops will come to be trained in Helmand itself; 10,000 in total will be trained in Helmand over the course of the next year, and we will then want to pass security control, district by district, to the Afghan people. We not only have a reason for being there—the threat of terrorism on the streets of our country—we also have a plan to give the Afghans control over their country, so that at some point our troops can come home.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister is right: of course it is for military commanders to make the precise dispositions. But everyone agrees that one of the keys to successful counter-insurgency is a dense population of troops to protect the civilian population, and the figures tell a vital story. Soon, 20,000 US forces will be responsible for some 30 per cent. of the population, and fewer than 10,000 British troops will be responsible for some 70 per cent. So let me just ask him again: how quickly does he think that this vital issue can be sorted out, so that we have effective counter-insurgency throughout southern Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman raises these questions, because I can point out to the Opposition that we are part of a coalition. These decisions are made as part of a coalition: they are made in Helmand with the Americans and the other forces who are there. Yes, we have decided to thicken in certain areas, but yes, the Americans have laid the priority for the next few months and years on training the Afghan forces, and that is what we are also going to do.

I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that we have an Afghan army of about 90,000, it will increase over the next year to about 135,000, and the number will have to go higher than that for Afghanistan to be able to sustain its own security control. The police force is at about 90,000 at the moment. It will have to be improved by police trainers, and we will need more police on the ground as well. That is the way forward for Afghanistan. I would say to the right hon. Gentleman again that decisions about the location of troops are a matter for commanders on the ground, but we work in close partnership with the Americans, and our decisions are taken with the rest of the alliance.

Mr. Cameron: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for that answer, and for discussing this issue. [Hon. Members: "Oh!"] No, honestly, this is an important point, and I do believe it has to be sorted out. Crucially, there are political elements to this decision, and what I am saying to him is that he will have our support if he makes those decisions.

Let me turn to a completely different subject. Tomorrow the House of Commons will be publishing the details of Members' second home allowances for the financial year 2008-09. That is a vital part of the process of rebuilding trust in this place, which everyone wants to happen. As of yesterday, the plans were to issue details of expenses, but without publishing the total expenses claimed by each MP. Does the Prime Minister agree that that would not be transparent and would infuriate the public who put us here, so will he take all the necessary steps to make sure that the current totals are published in full?

The Prime Minister: This is a matter for the Members Estimate Committee to make a judgment on. The shadow Leader of the House is a member of the Members Estimate Committee, as is the Leader of the House. We want the maximum transparency possible. I believe there is nothing that we have to hide, and we have got to get all the information out. Anything that maximises transparency is what I support, but I would have thought that the details of how we do it are best left to the Members Estimate Committee, and it is for the shadow Leader of the House to put his views there. I think, if I am right, that we were trying to reach a consensus about how we would move forward on these issues. I think we should all say that the sooner we can deal with all the issues the better, but the best way of dealing with them is by the process that we ourselves agreed.

Mr. Cameron: With respect, the question whether you publish the totals is not a matter of detail; it seems to me pretty profound. You have got to publish the totals so that the public can see that we are being open, transparent and straightforward about this issue that has done so much damage to this House.

After the Queen's Speech—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Government Back Benchers need to simmer down.

Mr. Cameron: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

After the Queen's Speech, I offered the Prime Minister our support if he brought forward the legislation to implement the Kelly report in full. The Leader of the House has said that she is prepared to talk about this. Can he confirm that the necessary legislation will be brought forward—and, indeed, that it will be published before Christmas? Does he agree with me that we need to end this damaging year for Parliament by showing once and for all that we "get it"?

The Prime Minister: On the very issue the right hon. Gentleman raises—perhaps he should know this—I understand that a meeting is taking place this afternoon to deal with exactly the issues that we are talking about. I would prefer that we agreed that there be the maximum transparency, and that we will do everything we can to make that happen. We have set up the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to do this. Let it get on with the job of doing it, and let us reach a consensus in this House that the maximum transparency is what we are going to achieve.

Mr. Cameron: Of course, but the point is that Kelly made a series of recommendations, and the Prime Minister said that the whole point of prolonging this Parliament

was to put them into place. Many of these recommendations require legislation, so the legislation needs to be brought forward.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is about to stand up and deliver his pre-Budget report. He should be announcing measures to bring the deficit under control. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that we should show some leadership, and begin with this place? Will he therefore support our plans for a 5 per cent. cut in ministerial pay followed by a five-year freeze, and a 10 per cent. cut in the size of the House of Commons?

The Prime Minister: Our deficit reduction plan involves major changes in how government operates, including how Ministers and civil servants operate. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will agree with the measures that we are bringing forward. I would say to him that the reason why we have a deficit is that we have spent to take ourselves through the recession. If we had taken his advice, more people would have been unemployed, more small businesses would have gone under, more mortgage owners would have lost their homes, and we would be facing a higher deficit and higher debt as a result. Mr. Speaker, when I listen to him now, it seems to me that he has lost the art of communication, but not, alas, the gift of speech.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Kevin Barron. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am sure Government Back Benchers want to hear their colleague.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that people who purport to stand to be Members of this House, and give interviews to national newspapers saying that if they are elected they will not claim expenses, and that their wealth makes them incorruptible, only for us to find that that wealth is held in tax havens abroad, are unfit to be Members of this House?

The Prime Minister: Some time the Conservative party will have to face up to the fact that it is the first party in history to have devised a tax policy just for itself.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I should like to add my own expressions of sympathy and condolence to the family and friends of Lance Corporal Adam Drane of 1st Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment, who tragically lost his life serving in Afghanistan on Monday. We will remember him, as we remember all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice serving in the mission in Afghanistan.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that fairness was in his DNA, and today we are told that fairness will be the centrepiece of the pre-Budget report. So why is it that 4 million children are still living in poverty, one in five young people are out of work and millions of poor pensioners will struggle this winter simply to keep warm? He dares to talk about fairness, but does he not realise how offensive that is to the millions of people who feel that they have been let down by Labour?

The Prime Minister: The last time we talked about it a few months ago, the right hon. Gentleman did not know the level of the state pension. I hope that he knows the level of child benefit and child tax credit, because child benefit, taken with tax credit, has trebled for the poorest families in this country since 1997. We have taken more children out of poverty than any previous Government since 1945, and we are taking more action today: if the right hon. Gentleman listens to the Chancellor, he will hear what he is going to do. Our record in taking children out of poverty, when poverty had trebled under the Conservatives, is one that we will build on in the years to come.

Mr. Clegg: Again, I do not get an answer, I get a list. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members can shout as much as they like, but it does not change the facts. Here is a list: child poverty is going up again — *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Clegg must be heard. It is very early in the day and Members are already overexcited. They need to simmer down.

Mr. Clegg: Here is a list that they do not like to hear. Child poverty is going up again. Inequality is going up. Last winter more people died of the cold than did a decade ago, and a child born today in the poorest part of this country will die a full 14 years before a child born somewhere else. That has not changed in 10 years. Will the Prime Minister now be honest? He has failed on fairness.

The Prime Minister: We have taken action over the 10 years. I know that the right hon. Gentleman does not like me reading lists of what we have done, but the problem is that he cannot read any lists of what he has done. What we have done is taken hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty, protected children and families against the costs of energy bills, given thousands of children Sure Start opportunities that they never would have had and doubled the child tax credit for nought to one-year-olds to help avoid infant poverty. The right hon. Gentleman wants to abolish the child trust fund, and we are giving young children the chance for the first time to have a trust fund of their own. We are the party that will give every child in this country a trust fund. For the Conservatives and the Liberals, trust funds are just for the few.

Early Intervention

Q2. [304964] **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with hon. Members on an all-party approach to policy on early intervention.

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his pioneering work on this issue. Following my meeting with him and parliamentary colleagues, I visited some of the early intervention projects in Nottingham, including in his constituency. I welcome everyone working together on early intervention. There are 50,000 families who need our help, and breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation requires us all to work consistently on early intervention over the years.

Mr. Allen: Do the Prime Minister and the other party leaders here today accept that giving our babies, children and young people the social and emotional bedrock that they need through early intervention not only gives

them a great start in life but, at a time of financial restraint, will save the taxpayer billions and billions of pounds by reducing the bill for low educational attainment, crime, drink and drug abuse, and lifetimes that are currently wasted on benefits?

The Prime Minister: I visited Nottingham, as I said, and saw the success of an early intervention programme that had taken a family that was in absolute chaos, and every single member of that family was benefiting from the professional work that had been done to help them. I have seen early intervention in action. We are putting in a programme in all parts of the country. It is complemented by Sure Start, where young people can get the chance, before nursery school age, to get help with learning, and help for their mothers with health and education. If we are going to have early intervention, we must also have Sure Start. I hope all parties in the House will want to maintain the Sure Start programme. There are 3,000 centres—an average of six in each constituency—and it is something that we want to build upon, not destroy.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that early intervention work is especially important in addressing the root causes of poverty?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely: dealing with the root causes of poverty involves helping people to find jobs. That is why we have the new deal—but unfortunately, it is opposed by the Conservative party. Tackling the root causes of poverty means helping people to deal with health problems. That is why we spend money on the health service, instead of calling it a 60-year-old mistake. That is what we are about—helping to deal with the root causes of the problem, by investing in people.

Engagements

Q3. [304965] **Lindsay Roy** (Glenrothes) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 December.

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Lindsay Roy: Child tax credits are a vital support for many parents, especially those on incomes of around £16,000. Will the Prime Minister reassure my constituents that he will not cut help for those many hard-working families to pay for tax cuts for the wealthiest few?

The Prime Minister: Child tax credits have lifted 500,000 children out of poverty, and they are now helping people through this recession: 400,000 families, some of whose breadwinners are on short-time work or work part time, have been able to claim tax credits worth, on average, £37 a week. That is our way of helping people out of recession. I would regret it very much if any party chose to cut tax credits by £400 million. I understand that that would affect every family with an income above £16,000—which means that it is a policy that will hurt the many, at a time when that same party wants to benefit the few.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Prime Minister should know that skills are vital for economic recovery and our competitiveness, so he will have been as disappointed as I was with Lord Mandelson's concession in the recently published skills strategy that the Government will miss their 2011 targets for level 3 technical skills. In that spirit of confession, will the Prime Minister now concede that fewer people are beginning level 3 apprenticeships than 10 years ago?

The Prime Minister: We are actually doing far more to increase the number of apprenticeships. There are more apprenticeships this year than last year—and let us remember that there were 70,000 apprenticeships in 1997, whereas there are a quarter of a million now. If the hon. Gentleman wants to help people to get to level 3, why does the Conservative party oppose the summer school leavers guarantee, which helps young people to get those qualifications in their teens? Why does the Conservative party oppose the money that is necessary to give every young person, not just some young people, a chance?

Q4. [304966] **Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): I have had many letters in recent weeks about the Copenhagen climate change conference. On the subject of low-carbon energy sources, can I ask my right hon. Friend what steps he is taking to convince people further of the importance of nuclear energy and wind farms in that overall policy?

The Prime Minister: We meet in a week when a big set of decisions has to be made at Copenhagen. I know that there is all-party support for our desire to get the best possible agreement at Copenhagen that could lead to substantial reductions in carbon. We—as Europe, and as Britain—have said that we will lead the way in making substantial reductions in carbon. I have to tell my hon. Friend that that will happen only if we have a balanced energy policy, and only if we are able to tackle the issue of renewables. Yes, we need nuclear power as part of our energy policy—I am sorry that the Opposition say that for them it is only a last resort—but we also need wind power as part of the renewables that we are going to create in the future. We need not just offshore wind power but onshore wind power, and I am sorry that applications are being turned down by Conservative authorities, when we want to get wind power and wind turbines in our country. I am afraid the Conservative policy on energy is all talk and no action—all wind and no turbine. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before hon. Members get too excited, I want to fit a lot more Back Benchers in.

Q12. [304974] **Alistair Burt** (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): Last Sunday, the people of Northall in my constituency were unable to obtain a drinks licence for their annual lunch at the village hall because the Government-imposed limit of 15 for the year had been reached. Inquiries of Bedfordshire police suggested that neither the lunch nor the hall regularly featured in their investigations of binge drinking and loutish behaviour. Will the Prime Minister review the bureaucratic and unnecessary regulation that prompts these decisions and ensure a return to local discretion, which is how these decisions should be made, or will he make way for a Government who will?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to take this issue up. I want people to have that opportunity. This should be a matter for far greater local discretion, and we will do our best to achieve that.

Q5. [304967] **Keith Vaz** (Leicester, East) (Lab): Last weekend a much-loved Leicestershire teacher, Mark Parker, died aged only 56 following a hypoglycaemic attack because of his diabetes. We currently spend £1 million an hour on treating diabetes-related illnesses, but there are still an estimated 7 million Britons with a pre-diabetes condition, probably including Members of Parliament. I was diagnosed only three years ago. What steps will the Government take to ensure that every person in this country has access to a diabetes test? That would save money, and in the long run save lives.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right about the importance of dealing with diabetes. The test for identifying those at risk of developing type 2 diabetes is included in the NHS health check that will be offered to those aged 40 to 74. It will also assess people's risk of heart disease, stroke and kidney disease, and help individuals to manage that risk. We believe that we will be able to identify at least 20,000 cases of diabetes and kidney disease earlier, and that will be important for the health of our country and for preventing the further costs that result when people suffer from those diseases. Investment in that programme now will save money later, and it is the right way forward for the national health service to give people personal guarantees that they will have those health checks free of charge.

Q6. [304968] **Mr. John Leech** (Manchester, Withington) (LD): Given that the Prime Minister has said that front-line NHS services should not be affected by cuts, will he join me in condemning the decision by NHS Manchester to close the Burnage walk-in centre, against the wishes of local people?

The Prime Minister: I understand that the closure has been postponed to allow the primary care trust to inform the people about the alternative services that are available. We have invested an additional £250 million in 100 new GP practices in poorly serviced areas and in 152 new health centres. This is a matter for decision by the local NHS, together with patients and others. I understand that the hon. Gentleman said at the last election that a hospital in his area would close: that hospital is still in being.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating American bedspring manufacturers Leggett & Platt on investing some $22 million in establishing their European headquarters in Grimethorpe in my constituency? That is mainly thanks to the efforts of Yorkshire Forward and the Barnsley development agency. Does he also agree with me that places such as Barnsley and Doncaster specifically, and Yorkshire and Humber in general, are still great places for foreign companies to invest?

The Prime Minister: This is exactly the policy that the Chancellor is pursuing, and that his pre-Budget report is about. It is about recovery from recession by investing in the future, and it is about getting growth in the economy so that we get new jobs in new areas. I applaud the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis) does. This is the party of jobs, whereas the Opposition would leave millions unemployed.

Q7. [304969] **Sir Alan Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): What is the Prime Minister prepared to do about the fact that some of the most vulnerable people who have the greatest difficulty in heating their homes pay the highest tariffs for their fuel, either because they have pre-payment meters or because they live in areas with no gas supply and do not have access to dual-fuel tariffs?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman has raised that point, because the Energy Bill is an attempt to deal with some of the problems that arise and to ensure that the social tariff is far fairer for people with difficulties. However, I also have to remind him that into the homes of thousands—indeed, millions—of pensioners in the past few days has come the winter fuel allowance, which is paid to everyone over 60, and is higher for the over-80s. It is one contribution that we can make to help with the heating bills of the poorest in our society, but it is a contribution made to every pensioner and everyone over 60 in our country. I hope that there is now a consensus that that is the right thing to do.

Q15. [304977] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): When I was out with the police on a Friday night in my area, only 14 police officers were on duty in the division, out of a total complement of 2,380. Will the Prime Minister intervene directly and swiftly to sort out the organisational malaise that characterises Nottinghamshire police?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary tells me that Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary is looking into Nottinghamshire police at the moment, but I have to say that the whole purpose of neighbourhood policing, which we have developed over the past two years, is to get more police on the streets. For that, we need to invest in policing and emphasise the concept that the police serve the neighbourhood. That is exactly what we are doing.

Q8. [304970] **Mr. Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree with Ben Bernanke that the Prime Minister's decision to strip the Bank of England of its supervising role led to a "destructive run" and a

"major problem for the British economy"?

The Prime Minister: No. I think that anybody who looks at the global recession knows that it started with the problems of the banking system in America, which spread right across the world. Our tripartite system is the right way to deal with these problems, because it brings together the Bank of England, the Financial Services Authority and the Treasury. I noticed that only yesterday the Leader of the Opposition changed the shadow Chancellor's policy on the future of the banking system, and that he also talked yesterday about introducing "flatter taxes". Flatter taxes mean less tax paid by the very wealthy. Before the Conservatives come to give us lectures on economic policy, they should go back to the drawing board.

Q9. [304971] **Emily Thornberry** (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give the public a guarantee that he will never lift the ban on hunting with dogs?

The Prime Minister: I am surprised that a political party wants to fight the next election on withdrawing the ban on fox hunting. In fact, that is that party's only job creation policy—to create a quango to run fox hunting. I believe that it is making a terrible mistake, and it will pay for it at the next election.

Pre-Budget Report

12.32 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Alistair Darling): Today's pre-Budget report takes place at a critical time for our economy and for our country. Governments across the world have taken co-ordinated steps to deal with the biggest financial crisis for over half a century. In the UK, our action has reduced the impact of this downturn on families and businesses, but there is still much uncertainty, so the task today is to ensure the recovery and promote long-term growth.

To promote growth, we need to invest in the dynamic sectors of the future—in digital, bio and low-carbon technology—and I will announce measures that will support those industries. To promote growth, we also need to invest in the skills of young people to prevent a lost generation of youth unemployment. I will announce measures to guarantee work opportunities for the young. To promote growth we also need to maintain support until the recovery is secured and to halve the deficit over four years, in an orderly way that does not threaten investment vital to our future. The choice is between going for growth and putting the recovery at risk—to reduce the deficit while protecting front-line services, or cuts that put those services in danger. The choice is between two competing visions. This pre-Budget report is about building a fairer society and securing opportunity for all.

When I delivered the pre-Budget report just over 12 months ago, we were faced with the sharpest and most widespread global downturn in generations. The near collapse of the financial system quickly fed through into the wider global economy. World trade went down sharply and unemployment sharply up across the world. Families and businesses in every continent felt the pain.

Governments around the world intervened to rescue the banking system. We supported our economies with tax cuts, increased Government spending and co-ordinated action to lower interest rates and to boost money supply. No choices were easy choices; indeed, some even argued that we should not have acted at all. But as a result of those actions, there is growing evidence that global confidence is returning. The US housing market, which triggered the crisis, is stabilising—so is the housing market here. Global manufacturing is up almost 6 per cent., world stock markets by 30 per cent.

As the world's largest financial centre, the turmoil in the banking sector has had a substantial effect on the UK. With more home owners here than in Europe, a global slump in property prices hit confidence hard in this country. As the sixth biggest exporter of goods and the second largest exporter of services, our trade has been hit. But as demand picks up abroad, as is already happening, British businesses will benefit. So I am confident that the UK economy will start growing by the turn of the year.

However, across the world, there remain risks to recovery. Oil prices are volatile. Recent market reaction to financial problems in Dubai highlights just how fragile world confidence remains. So while I am confident that the UK economy is on the road to recovery, we cannot be complacent. We must continue to support the economy until recovery is established. To cut support now could wreck the recovery. That is a risk that I am not prepared to take.

This time last year, we recognised the exceptional trading difficulties that businesses here were facing. In the past, inaction by Government to support firms led to widespread—and avoidable—business failure. I was determined that we did not repeat that mistake. So in an unprecedented move, I cut VAT to 15 per cent. for a year, to put more than £11 billion into the pockets of consumers and retailers. That countered the impact on businesses of the global credit squeeze and the collapse in consumer demand when it was needed most. I can confirm that VAT will return to 17.5 per cent. on 1 January, as planned. I have no other changes in VAT to announce.

To ease problems with cash flow and access to bank lending, we deferred tax rises and extended tax allowances for businesses. Because we chose to intervene, the rate of business insolvencies is far lower than would have been expected. In the recession of the early 1990s, proportionally twice as many businesses went under. While some measures such as the VAT cut and the working capital and trade credit insurance schemes are finishing, it is right to extend others while uncertainty remains. The time-to-pay scheme has helped more than 160,000 businesses spread their tax payments over a timetable that they can afford. They can get additional time when they need it most and, because firms continue trading, the likelihood of companies paying the tax owed increases, so I have decided that the scheme will be extended for as long as it is needed.

Last year, I temporarily increased the threshold for empty property relief to help small businesses. I can announce that it will be extended, so that for 2010-11, empty commercial properties with a rateable value below £18,000 will be exempt from business rates. Seventy per cent. of all empty properties will continue, therefore, to be exempt. I have one further announcement to help small businesses. I have decided to defer the increase in corporation tax for smaller companies. That will leave the 2010 rate unchanged for 850,000 small businesses, helping them until the recovery is secured.

In the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of families lost their homes. I did not want to see that repeated, so we introduced a range of measures to allow families to stay in their homes and to help young couples on to the housing ladder. As a result, repossessions are now running at around half the rate of the recession of the early 1990s. By the time the stamp duty holiday finishes at the end of this month, I expect 240,000 home buyers to have been helped. But with unemployment still likely to rise, it would not be right to withdraw all support now for home owners.

Last year I improved the scheme giving support for mortgage interest, to provide better cover for mortgage interest payments for those who had lost their jobs. More than 220,000 people have been helped so far. I have decided that that additional support will be extended for a further six months. There will, of course, be a cost to that and other continued Government support, but the cost to families of losing their home would be immense, and it would be a false economy for the country. The more successful these measures are in restoring confidence to the housing market, the lower the cost will be to the Exchequer.

The best way of avoiding repossessions is to help people to stay in work or re-enter the labour market quickly. Such a deep global recession was always going to have a damaging impact on employment. The bleak news last week that Corus is to shut its Teesside plant underlined the fact that the reduction in global demand will have an impact on jobs for some time to come. That is why, yesterday, I agreed with the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills to provide £30 million from within existing resources to help industry in Teesside.

No Government, even during times of the strongest economic growth, can prevent every job loss. Unemployment has risen in the UK and will keep rising for some time, but it remains lower than it was in France, Canada, the United States and the euro area. In fact, even now, there are some 2.5 million more people in work than there were in 1997. Because of our values of fairness and opportunity, promoting employment has always been, and remains, a top priority for this Government. Unemployment can never be a price worth paying.

As the global recession hit our country, we responded by bringing forward investment in vital infrastructure projects to protect jobs, and finding an additional £3 billion to help people to find new work more quickly. We expanded the Jobcentre Plus network and offered support through the rapid response service to staff in 3,000 firms hit by redundancies. Help including training, volunteering and recruitment subsidies has been offered to those still unemployed after six months.

It is clear that we are making a difference. Unemployment has increased much less than expected by independent forecasters. If we had seen the same rate of job losses, relative to GDP, as we saw in the early 1990s, four times as many people would have lost their jobs. Despite the severity of the global recession, the claimant count today stands at 1.6 million, compared with the 3 million reached in 1985 and 1992. Our comprehensive support means that a short spell in unemployment is not turning into a lifetime on benefits, as happened in the recessions of the '80s and '90s. Indeed, more than 3 million people have been helped off the claimant count in the past year.

Despite this support, there are groups who need more help. Past recessions have had a very damaging impact on young people, who should have been starting their working lives, but instead were unemployed. Our package of support for the young already includes a place for every 16 and 17-year-old in education or training. I intend to provide funding so that this guarantee will be available to school leavers again next September. In the Budget, I went further and announced that every 18 to 24-year-old would be guaranteed work or training after 12 months out of work. I do not want them to have to wait that long, however, so I am going to bring that forward. I have decided that, from next month, no one under 24 needs to be unemployed for longer than six months before being guaranteed work or training.

In the past, older people were allowed—indeed, often encouraged—to drift into permanent unemployment, but we cannot afford to write off their experience. So we will ensure that the over-50s receive specialist and tailored support to equip them with the confidence and skills they need to get a job. We also want to encourage those who want to stay working part-time after they reach retirement age, and to make work pay for everyone, regardless of their age. To make it easier for those over 65 to receive the working tax credit, we will reduce the minimum number of hours they need to work to be eligible.

We chose not to let people sink when they lost their jobs, but to intervene to help them to stay afloat. That is good for the individuals and their families, and also for the wider economy, boosting spending and, in turn, creating new jobs. The more successful our targeted support, the more likely that the rise in unemployment will be lower than expected and therefore cost the country less, as has already happened. Government action has made a real difference.

The worldwide recession has had an impact on all families, and it is often the most vulnerable who are affected the most, including those on modest incomes who have been put on shorter hours. The Government's flexible tax credits system has risen to the challenge of the downturn, delivering substantial support to families to compensate for that loss of pay. I can tell the House that so far this year, because of tax credits 400,000 families whose income has fallen have benefited from that extra help—on average by £37 more per week. For those who doubt the value of tax credits, here is the proof that they work.

The recession has also had other effects. For the first time in half a century, the retail prices index has been negative for much of the year. That helps families with the cost of essential goods, but many benefits and tax credits are also linked to the September RPI. RPI inflation last September was minus 1.4 per cent. That would have meant no increase in those benefits in April. I do not believe that such a freeze would be fair, so I can confirm that the basic state pension will not be frozen, but will rise by 2.5 per cent. in April—a real-terms increase of nearly 4 per cent.

I can also tell the House that, from the time of the Budget, I will cut bingo duty from 22 to 20 per cent.—*[Interruption.]* Obviously a popular measure. I also want to help families in receipt of other benefits linked to the inflation figures, such as child benefit and some disability benefits, so those benefits will rise by 1.5 per cent. in April.

We are committed to helping people back into work, and making work pay. I have decided to roll out across the country a guarantee that anyone in work will always be better off than they were on benefits. If that is not happening already, they will be guaranteed extra money from the Government, making sure that work really does pay for everyone and encouraging more people to re-enter the labour market. So we are continuing to provide targeted support for people and businesses, as we secure the recovery.

Across world economies, the first half of this year saw a sharper deterioration than had been expected. That was also true here in the UK. Up to the third quarter of this year, the global recession has meant a cumulative economic contraction of 3.2 per cent. in the United States, 5.6 per cent. in Germany, 5.9 per cent. in Italy and 7.7 per cent. in Japan. Over the year as a whole, the UK economy is expected to have contracted by 4.75 per cent. this year, but as I forecast at the Budget, I expect a return to growth in the fourth quarter.

Next year, I forecast growth of between 1 and 1.5 per cent., as I said in the Budget. Because of the underlying strength of our economy, the pick-up in world demand

[Mr. Alistair Darling]

and the substantial spare capacity opened up by the recession, my Budget forecast, broadly in line with that of the Bank of England, of growth of 3.5 per cent. in 2011 and 2012 remains unchanged. This growth, however, will come from more varied sources and not depend as much on the financial sector, which will, of course, remain an important part of our economy. Growth will be driven by fresh opportunities to export as the global economy expands and by investment by businesses in the key industries of the future. It is growth that I am determined to support in this pre-Budget report.

Partly because of the reversal of the VAT cut, consumer inflation will rise from 1.5 per cent. to around 3 per cent. early next year, before falling back. The Bank of England expects inflation then to fall below target and reach 1.5 per cent. by the end of next year.

The global recession has had an impact on the public finances in every country, with tax revenues falling and spending increasing to support the economy. Here in the United Kingdom, the financial sector, which provided over a quarter of all corporate tax revenues, has been hard hit. Revenues from stamp duty and income tax are sharply down and it will take time for tax revenues to recover.

Our steps to maintain stability in the banking sector have also had an impact on the public finances. At the Budget, given the extreme uncertainty at the time, I made a provisional £50 billion estimate of the possible taxpayer losses from our interventions in the financial sector. Those risks have now significantly diminished because of the successful intervention of Governments to support the global financial system. Lloyds Banking Group, for example, has been able to raise capital from the markets and is not receiving Government support in the asset protection scheme. We have also restructured RBS's participation in that scheme, so there are no expected losses for the taxpayer. Other banks are also in a much more stable situation. As a result, I can revise down my provision for any potential impact on the public finances from £50 billion to around £10 billion, but our objective remains to get all the taxpayers' money back, on top of the fees charged for supporting banks through this crisis.

I have made clear that support during the downturn must go hand-in-hand with steps to rebuild our fiscal strength once recovery is firmly established. Backed by legislation introduced today, the Government will ensure that public sector net borrowing as a share of GDP falls every year and is more than halved by 2013-14, and that net debt as a share of GDP is falling in 2015-16. I believe that that is a sensible timetable. To consolidate too soon, too quickly or too indiscriminately, as some have proposed, would risk delaying the recovery and threatening a longer recession. When Japan tightened prematurely in the 1990s, it pushed the economy back into recession, making debt and deficits higher, not lower.

Taken as a whole, this pre-Budget report secures a fall in borrowing each year until 2013-14 to meet our deficit reduction plan. In the Budget, I forecast that public sector net borrowing would be £175 billion this year and would then fall to £97 billion in 2013-14. Because of the severity of the recession, my forecast for this year's borrowing is £178 billion. Next year it will fall to £176 billion. As the economy recovers and the deficit reduction plan starts to take effect, it will fall to £140 billion and then to £117 billion, and will reach £96 billion in 2013-14—a slightly lower level than I forecast in April—before falling to £82 billion in 2014-15. As a share of GDP, borrowing will be 12.6 per cent. this year, 12 per cent. next year, then 9.1 per cent., then 7.1 per cent., and 5.5 per cent. in 2013-14. It will fall to 4.4 per cent. in 2014-15. If we exclude public sector investment, or capital spending, and take the economic cycle into account, the budget deficit is expected to fall to 1.9 per cent. at the end of the forecast period.

Public sector debt has increased in every G20 country as a result of this global recession. Net debt as a share of GDP is expected to reach 82 per cent. in Germany, 83 per cent. in France, and 85 per cent. in the United States. As a result of the lower provision for possible losses in our financial sector this year, I can forecast that net debt will reach 56 per cent. of GDP. It will then rise to 65 per cent. next year, and to 78 per cent. by the end of the forecast period in 2014-15. However, net debt as a share of GDP will fall the year after that. Even at its peak, debt will be in line with the average for the other G7 economies.

I believe that we have made the right choices to help the country through the recession when we could have chosen to do nothing. We also need to make the right choices to reduce the deficit. In the Budget, I set out how we would do that by encouraging growth now and in the future, with fair tax increases and with tighter control of public spending. I now want to set out further details of how we will achieve this deficit reduction plan.

The combination of the talents of the British people and today's low inflation and low interest rate environment provides us with a strong platform to meet our ambition of long-term sustainable growth—so does having the most flexible labour market in Europe, the lowest rate of corporation tax in the G7, and a competition regime that is among the best in the world. That is why ours is judged to be one of the best locations in which to do business and attract inward investment. I am determined to build on those strengths today by maintaining our leadership in the low-carbon sector, boosting investment in our national infrastructure and skills, and supporting our world-class high-tech industries.

In line with the overall neutrality of this pre-Budget report, two thirds of the targeted measures that I shall now announce come from within existing budgets. If businesses are to expand and grow, they need access to credit. Following the intervention by the Government, total bank loans to businesses today are above where they were when the crisis hit in 2007. We have seen over £50 billion in new business loans from RBS and Lloyds alone. But unsurprisingly, at the same time other businesses have reacted to the uncertainty by repaying existing loans, which is why net lending as a whole is down. I am very aware that some small and medium-sized businesses still encounter difficulties in obtaining loans. As recovery gets under way, we shall need to ensure that SMEs obtain the credit they need. We must work with the banks to ensure that that happens. We are also working to secure a contribution from major banks towards a £500 million growth capital fund which will invest specifically in small businesses. We will announce further details shortly.

In January we launched the enterprise finance guarantee, which has already offered Government guarantees on bank loans to over 6,000 businesses. Today I have decided to extend the scheme for a further 12 months, which will guarantee a further £500 million of loans to small businesses.

This week sees the start of the UN conference on climate change, an historic opportunity for the reaching of a universal agreement to tackle global warming. We can be proud that the UK has led the way: on meeting Kyoto targets, introducing carbon budgets, and recognising that developing countries need help to reduce their own emissions. Tackling climate change will bring new opportunities for new low-carbon industries, and that will create the high-skilled, high-paid jobs that are crucial to our future prosperity.

Today I can redirect existing funding and invest in wind power, renewable energy and other green industries. Through the innovation investment fund and the Carbon Trust's venture capital scheme, we will support at least £160 million of public and private investment in low-carbon projects. We will also invest £90 million in the European Investment Bank's new 2020 fund, which will enable €6.5 billion of finance to be made available for green infrastructure projects. I can also tell the House that we will double our commitment to finance four carbon capture and storage demonstration projects, which will make us world leaders in that vital area.

As well as investing in clean and low-carbon technologies, we must all become more energy-efficient and cut emissions as well as household bills. The roll-out of smart meters, which will be completed in 2020, will help families to identify how to become more energy-efficient. Improving home insulation is key. A quarter of all the country's emissions come from households. Already 235,000 homes have benefited from the Warm Front scheme to provide more efficient heating and insulation for the most vulnerable. Today I can announce an additional £200 million, from April, to help with energy efficiency. An extra 75,000 households will benefit from an extension of the scheme. That will go alongside further requirements, amounting to up to £300 million overall, for the energy companies to provide discounts on energy bills for a further 1 million low-income households.

Inefficient domestic boilers add over £200 to household bills and 1 tonne of carbon to the atmosphere each year. I therefore want to build on the successful car scrappage scheme. I want to help 125,000 homes to replace those inefficient boilers with new models. I can also announce changes to the climate change levy, company car tax, and fuel benefit charge.

I have three more targeted measures to announce. From April, people with home wind turbines or solar panels who plug excess power into the national grid will receive, on average, £900 a year. I intend to make that payment tax-free. To help to boost the number of electric cars on our streets, I have decided to exempt them from company car tax for five years. I can also announce 100 per cent. first-year capital allowances for electric vans.

A key component of our growth strategy is investment to keep goods and people moving. The Government have made huge strides in rebuilding the national infrastructure following years of neglect. Continued public investment here is essential to growth. This year public sector investment reached a 30-year high, and has delivered more than 70 road and motorway schemes and improved journey times across the rail network. Work is now under way on Crossrail, the Thameslink project and, from this month, the upgrade of the M1. All that work will continue; so will the rail electrification programmes for the Great Western main line and the north-west that were announced in July.

I have given the go-ahead to further plans for rail electrification between Liverpool, Manchester and Preston. My right hon. and noble Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will announce further details shortly. The Government will also respond, early next year, to the proposals for a new high-speed rail line from London to the west midlands and to the north and Scotland.

Since 1997, we have helped millions of people gain qualifications or training. The number of apprenticeships has doubled. New advanced apprenticeships will meet the skills needed in key growth areas, such as advanced manufacturing, low carbon, digital technologies, and the biosciences. We also want to break down informal barriers that close off some careers to undergraduates, particularly from poorer backgrounds, so I can announce that we will offer financial support for up to 10,000 undergraduates from low-income backgrounds to take up short-term internships in industry, businesses and the professions. This will give them a taste of careers that they may not otherwise have considered. We will announce further details shortly.

We are modernising the UK's digital infrastructure and, in the process, creating thousands more skilled jobs. We have provided funding to help extend the opportunities of the broadband network to more remote communities. We now want to go further, so that we can provide the next generation of super-fast broadband to 90 per cent. of the population by the end of 2017. That will be funded through a duty of 50p a month on landlines, which will be included in the Finance Bill.

The oil and gas industry is an essential part of our economy. To encourage further investment, I am today relaxing the criteria of the field allowances, to support the development of up to eight known fields and to encourage further exploration. We will work with industry to look at how best to ensure the development of infrastructure to the west of Shetland.

We already have a tremendous track record in key growth industries. We have the leading medical biotechnology sector in Europe. Our aerospace industry is the second largest in the world. Our creative sector has increased exports by 60 per cent. since the beginning of this decade. All of that has been supported through our investment in science and our targeted tax policy. This country has a remarkable record of ideas and innovation. We have won more Nobel prizes than any other country of our size. We need to do more to support this ingenuity and ensure this creativity is harnessed by this country. I want to encourage research and development in the pharmaceuticals and biotech industries in particular. So, following consultation with business, I will introduce a new 10 pence corporation tax on income that stems from patents in the UK. This will help maintain jobs in science and technology in this country.

I also want to build on our world-class achievements in medical research. With the Wellcome Trust, Cancer Research UK and University college London, we are working on plans to establish the largest institute in Europe for research into long-term medical challenges.

[Mr. Alistair Darling]

The new strategic investment fund, set up in April, has already agreed vital support to hi-tech projects such as Airbus in Wales and the life sciences in Scotland. We will expand this work through £100 million of redirected funds and an extra £100 million. By supporting the low-carbon sector and investing in our vital infrastructure and our world-class industries, we will secure growth, create new jobs and provide the revenue to help rebuild our fiscal strength.

Supporting growth is vital to provide the future revenue to halve borrowing over the next four years, but, as I have said, it also requires us to take some tough decisions on tax now. I am determined that any tax increases will continue to be guided by our values of fairness and responsibility. Last year, the banks made collective losses of £80 billion in this country alone. This would have been much higher without the unprecedented level of support from the taxpayer. There is no bank that has not benefited, either directly or indirectly, from this help. This should be a time for banks to rebuild their capital base and become stronger. A tax on profits, as has been suggested, would prevent them from doing that, so I have decided against a windfall tax. However, there are some banks who still believe their priority is to pay substantial bonuses to some already high-paid staff. Their priority should be to rebuild their financial strength and increase their lending, so I am giving them a choice: they can use their profits to build up their capital base, but if they insist on paying substantial rewards, I am determined to claw money back for the taxpayer. I have decided to introduce from today a special one-off levy of 50 per cent. on any individual discretionary bonus above £25,000. This will be paid by the bank, not the bank employee, and anti-avoidance measures will be introduced with immediate effect. High-paid bank staff will, of course, also have to pay, as usual, income tax at their top rate on any bonus they receive. On a cautious assumption, which includes our expectation that some banks will rein back on bonuses, this levy is expected to yield just over £500 million. That additional money will be used to pay for the extra measures that I have already announced, such as help for the young and older unemployed to get back into work.

Under the existing rules, the highest earners benefit disproportionately from tax relief on pensions. At present, a quarter of all the money spent on pensions tax relief goes to the top 1.5 per cent. of earners. To make this fairer, I announced in the Budget that we would reduce pension tax relief for people with incomes of over £150,000. I want to do that as fairly as possible, and to treat individuals the same regardless of whether they receive their pay as current salary or as a future pension benefit, and prevent avoidance, so I have decided to include employer pension contributions in the definition of income for this tax measure. To provide certainty, I will introduce a floor so that, irrespective of the size of employer pension contributions, no one with an income below £130,000 will be affected.

I believe it is right that parents should be able to pass on savings to their children. Before the financial crisis rocked the global economy, I enabled married couples to combine their inheritance tax allowances, and this will continue. I also said then that allowances would rise to reflect inflation and the expected continued increase in house prices, but I do not believe that raising this allowance can possibly be a priority given the impact of the downturn on the country's finances, so I have decided to freeze the individual allowance at £325,000 for the next year. That will still mean that fewer than 3 per cent. of estates will pay inheritance tax.

I have decided against any further changes to income tax rates or thresholds next year, except for some changes in what can be tax-deductible. Because RPI inflation was negative in September, this will provide a real-terms benefit relative to inflation, but in April 2012 I have decided to freeze the point at which people start to pay income tax at 40 per cent. for one year. No one with income below £43,000 will be affected by this change.

It is also fair that those who should pay tax do not escape their responsibilities. I am determined to tackle activities such as avoidance and evasion, which undermine tax receipts. Since the Budget, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has asked for details of at least 100,000 offshore accounts held at over 300 financial institutions. This pre-Budget report sets out anti-avoidance and smaller tax measures to deliver additional revenues and protect £5 billion a year of existing revenues.

These are tough, but necessary, measures to increase tax, but I have done this in a fair way: those on modest incomes are protected; those on middle incomes will pay more, depending on their earnings; but the biggest burden will fall on those with the broadest shoulders. Today's measures, combined with those from the Budget and last year's pre-Budget report, mean that over half of the additional revenue raised will be paid by the top 2 per cent. of earners.

Fairness in tax is a crucial part of maintaining fiscal sustainability, but the majority of the reduction in borrowing will have to come from slower growth in overall public spending. We have already set out our spending plans until April 2011, but I believe it would be dangerous, as the head of the International Monetary Fund said only a couple of weeks ago, to reduce spending too soon, so to continue to support jobs and the economy, we have decided to stick to our spending plans for next year. In 2010-11, total public spending will increase by £31 billion, a growth rate of 2.2 per cent. in real terms, providing continuing strong support for the wider economy until the recovery is firmly established. Once recovery is secured, we must, as I made clear at the time of the Budget, reduce the rate of growth in public spending, and meet our ambitious target to halve the deficit.

We take these decisions from a position of strength. In 1997, our public services were in crisis. Chronic under-investment in health and education had taken its toll: hospitals with too few nurses and doctors to meet the needs of patients; schools with too few teachers, textbooks and computers. The country had failed, too, to invest in transport and national infrastructure, all of which was damaging to our economy and prosperity. That was the record we inherited and that was the record we had to deal with. We have worked to turn it around, through a combination of strong investment and far-reaching reform.

So, although the period ahead is going to be challenging, our public services are in a better state they have been for decades. However, we have to be realistic: the spending environment will be tough over the next few years. For as long as extraordinary uncertainties remain in the world economy, this is not a time for a spending review.

We have already set out clear and firm departmental budgets for the next financial year, but to try to fix each Department's budget now for the next five years is neither necessary nor sensible. We can, however, set out a clear direction, based on our economic priorities and our values as a Government.

We are clear that, following the investment made over the past decade, current spending growth can be set lower than in the past and fall to an average of 0.8 per cent. a year between 2011-12 and 2014-15. That will mean cuts to some budgets, as programmes come to an end or resources are switched, and it will mean that some programmes will need to be stopped altogether. We believe that if Departments can find further savings and cuts within their existing budgets, as many are already announcing, that will release resources so that they can continue to provide services. Already individual Departments have made great strides in finding savings—£10 billion in the NHS, £800 million in education and more than £400 million in the police—but even in this much tighter financial environment we are determined to protect front-line services and sustain the improvements that have been delivered over the past decade. The pre-Budget report sets out our plan to do that while halving the deficit.

First, we must make sure that we get maximum value for every pound we spend. Between 2005 and 2008, we delivered £26.5 billion of annual efficiency savings, and between 2008 and 2011 we are delivering further efficiencies worth more than 3 per cent. of total departmental spending per year. This week, we announced plans to deliver another round of savings, amounting to £12 billion a year by 2013-14. We will abolish quangos, cut consultancy and marketing costs, improve procurement and streamline back-office functions. We will also sell those assets that can be managed better by the private sector.

Secondly, we need to focus better on those areas that make most difference to people's lives. We have begun a root-and-branch review to examine every area of Government spending to drive through efficiency, to cut waste and to cut lower priority budgets. Today, I am able to announce £5 billion of savings from spending programmes. This includes: phasing-in the roll-out of pension personal accounts; cutting back on the scope of major IT projects; reforming legal aid and outsourcing inefficient prisons; refocusing regeneration spending, so that it is spent where it is most needed; and cutting the cost of residential care by supporting older people to stay in their own homes. Those are necessary choices.

Thirdly, on public sector pay and pensions, public pensions need to be broadly in line with those offered in the private sector. So, by 2012 contributions by the state to public sector pensions for teachers, local government, the NHS and the civil service will be capped, saving about £1 billion a year. Public sector workers will make a greater contribution to the increasing value of pensions, with those earning more than £100,000 paying more. Public sector pay makes up about half of departmental spending. The senior civil service will take the lead with a cut in its pay bill of up to £100 million over three years, and any new Government appointment of someone on more than £150,000 and all bonuses of more than £50,000 will require explicit approval by the Treasury. I can announce that for the two years from 2011 we will ensure that all public sector pay settlements are capped at 1 per cent. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Mr. Bellingham, we have, on a regular basis, a running commentary from you, but the House does not need it and the country does not need it either.

Mr. Darling: As with previous pay decisions, we will recognise the special circumstances of the armed forces. There will be savings of £12 billion from greater efficiency, of £5 billion from scaling back or cutting lower priorities, and of more than £4.5 billion from reducing the cost of public sector pay and pensions. These are difficult choices, but they are essential if we are to stick to our plan to halve the deficit and protect the front line.

Our first priority today must be to ensure that our armed forces have all the resources they need. The whole House, especially this week, will want to join me in praising the dedication and valour of our troops, especially those engaged in the conflict in Afghanistan. They deserve all our support and we must match that support with resources. For the next year, I can announce that a further £2.5 billion will be set aside for military operations in Afghanistan. At the same time, we will continue to improve the effectiveness of core defence spending, reducing the civilian work force and restructuring the Department. I also want to do more to help those who have served in combat zones and are retiring from the forces, so I can announce that £5 million will be allocated from the strategic investment fund to help ex-service personnel who want to set up their own businesses.

In 2005, we led the way towards abolishing the debts of the poorest countries, and we have committed to doing more in the fight against global poverty. Spending on overseas aid remains a very small proportion of our overall budget, but it does make a huge difference to the lives of millions of people, as well as creating a fairer world, helping to build markets for our goods and countering extremism. I can confirm that we will honour our commitments, so spending on overseas aid will rise to 0.7 per cent of gross national income by 2013.

Our priority is to protect those services that are absolutely essential to the health of our society and the strength of our economy: the health service, which is crucial for our well-being; the police force, which is crucial for our safety; and our schools, which are crucial for our future. I am determined that we will protect improvements in those front-line services, on which millions of people rely. That cannot be done without a further difficult decision. I intend to increase all employer, employee and self-employed rates of national insurance by a further half pence from April 2011. But to protect those on modest incomes, I have also decided to raise the starting point from which national insurance is payable, and no-one earning less than £20,000 will pay more contributions as a result. This will raise £3 billion a year from 2011-12.

As a result, I am today able to offer guaranteed minimum real-terms increases in front-line NHS and schools spending for two years from 2011, as well as providing sufficient funding to maintain the number of police and community support officers. That means that I can confirm not just that we will increase spending as planned next year on hospitals, schools and policing, but we can pledge that spending on these crucial front-line services will continue to rise over and above inflation

[Mr. Darling]

after 2010-11, so that we can meet the improved public service guarantees and entitlements that we have set out. There will of course be Barnett consequentials for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I have one further announcement to make: because of my decisions today, I am able to extend free school meals to 500,000 primary school children of low-income working parents who previously would not have been eligible. Once that is fully rolled out, it will lift an additional 50,000 children out of relative poverty and will be a step towards our target of abolishing child poverty by 2020.

The decisions the Government have made have helped support businesses and families through the deepest global recession for more than 60 years. These are decisions that have been followed across the world but, of course, have been opposed by some here. The steps that I have announced today are aimed at securing recovery, reducing borrowing and, through targeted investment, providing a springboard for long-term growth. The choice facing the country is between securing recovery and wrecking it; between investment to build a fair society where all prosper or a divided society that favours the wealthy few; and between ambition driven by the values of fairness and opportunity or austerity driven by an outdated dogma. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): Today, confronted with the biggest budget deficit in our peacetime history, the right hon. Gentleman faced a choice: would he take the tough spending decisions before the general election or would he completely duck them? We were promised a pre-Budget report and what we got was a pre-election report. The Government have today lost all the moral authority to govern. Instead, the full scale of the economic disaster that Labour has visited on this country is clear to us all: the biggest debt we have ever known; spending cut on almost everything; taxes up on anyone who earns more than £20,000 a year; Labour's new tax on jobs; and higher interest rates to pay for the higher borrowing. Every family in the country will be forced to pay for years for this Prime Minister's mistakes. At the end of their period in office, they have indeed adhered to the greatest of golden rules: "Never trust a Labour Government with your money again."

Everything that the Government have told us on the economy collapses in the face of the truth. They told us that they would be prudent, and the figures that they have produced have shown us that Labour has quadrupled the national debt while in office. They told us that Britain was better prepared than other countries, and now our budget deficit is higher than that of any other comparable country anywhere else in the world. They specifically told us—this Prime Minister told us—that Britain would lead the world out of recession, and now the rest of the world leaves Britain behind as it recovers.

We are the only G20 economy in recession, and that Prime Minister used to stand at the Dispatch Box on occasions like this and say that he had rewritten the laws of economics, that he had abolished the trade cycle, and that he had abolished boom and bust. The numbers that the Chancellor has given us confirm that this Prime Minister inflicted on us the deepest and longest recession in our modern history. No one will ever believe a word they say on the economy again.

Faced with this catastrophe, the Chancellor had three tasks today: first, to restore confidence in the Treasury forecasts; secondly, to produce at last—we hoped—a credible plan to deal with Britain's record debts; and finally, to show the world that Britain is open for business again and can create jobs. He failed on all three accounts.

First, the forecasts. Every single time this Chancellor has come to this House, he has got his forecasts wrong, and today was no different. He confirmed that the GDP figures for this year show a contraction of 4.75 per cent. That is not only a full percentage point worse than the figure in the Budget—it is almost four times worse than when he delivered the last pre-Budget report. I noticed in his speech a little sleight of hand. He gave the annual contraction figure for the UK and the total contraction figure for every other country. The total contraction figure for the UK is 5.9 per cent., the worst since the 1930s.

It would be difficult to imagine that this year's forecast for borrowing would be an underestimate, but so it turned out to be. I am told that they are having a row in Downing street: the Prime Minister wants to get his forecasts wrong on purpose, while the Chancellor prefers to get them wrong by accident. Either way, Britain is borrowing £178 billion this year and £176 billion next year. This is a figure that he did not give: £789 billion of additional borrowing over the next six years, and that is based on some pretty heroic growth assumptions in future years. Of course, a sneaky fiddling of the definition of the structural deficit was buried in the report. It all amounts to the fact that he is doubling the national debt from where it is today to £1.4 trillion—£23,000 for every child born today.

Without a hint of irony or contrition, the Chancellor publishes today what is farcically called a Fiscal Responsibility Bill—as if we needed a law to tell us that their irresponsibility has been criminal. This is what one of the Prime Minister's own appointments to the Monetary Policy Committee has just said about their law:

"Fiscal responsibility acts are instruments of the fiscally irresponsible to con the public."

The Chancellor should have introduced our plan for a proper, independent office for budget responsibility that will keep the Chancellor honest and ensure that never again can a Government fail to fix the roof when the sun is shining.

So, the Chancellor has not restored confidence in Treasury forecasts. That was his first task. His second was to set out a credible plan to deal with the debt crisis. Yesterday, as he well knows, another credit rating agency warned that that the UK was at risk of a downgrade. Even this morning, the deputy leader of the Labour party was admitting on television that markets are getting more nervous than they were about Government borrowing. The Governor of the Bank of England says that we must

"eliminate a large part of the structural deficit"

over the lifetime of this Parliament. I agree with the man in charge of monetary policy in this country. Yet today the Chancellor is sticking with the same plan that he set out in the Budget—the plan that the Bank of

England, the CBI and the OECD have all told him is not credible. The whole object of policy going forward as we come into recovery is to keep interest rates as low as possible for as long as possible. That is not what his recipe provides today.

As the debts have become bigger, so the Government's response gets smaller. What the Chancellor had to say to the House today on spending is just not credible. He promises more efficiency savings, but coming from the people who have just admitted that they wasted £4 billion on an NHS computer system, that rings a little hollow. As for the waste advisers who wrote those reports that the Chancellor is publishing today, they have lived up to their names by deciding that they will not waste any more time with him: they are working with us.

Then there are the proposals on bankers. We warned the Chancellor two months ago that he should try to stop big cash bonuses being paid out. I said in my conference speech that we should look at the tax system. Let us be clear: the Government are going to pay out a load of bankers' bonuses that they should not have been paying out in the first place, then put a one-year windfall tax on them and declare it a triumph. The real test of this new tax will be whether it curbs bank bonuses instead of curbing bank lending. Let us hope that it is more effective than those binding lending agreements that we once heard so much about at that Dispatch Box.

The Government say that they will use the money on youth unemployment, because instead of abolishing it, as promised, the Prime Minister has led youth unemployment to a record high. We need a real, lasting plan to get Britain working and to deal not just with the million or more people who have lost their job under Labour, but the millions more who have never had a job under Labour.

On spending, the Chancellor is prepared to tell us what he will spend money on, but he stays almost totally silent on where the real axe will fall. He is achieving the previously impossible trick of ring-fencing a black hole. He said, with understatement, that this is not the time for a comprehensive spending review. This is from a Chancellor who said that that he was acting from a position of strength! Why is it not the time for a comprehensive spending review? The Government have all the figures and they have access to all the information that they need. They had spending reviews just before the 2001 election and just before the 2005 election. Now, suddenly, the spending review has to wait until after the 2010 election. That spending review is the massive missing piece of this pre-Budget report. They have given us lavish detail on the few things that they say that they are protecting, and almost nothing on the many things that they are planning to cut. They are not being honest with the British people about the real price of their incompetence. This has got nothing to do with protecting front-line services and everything to do with protecting themselves. What we see today is not a credible plan on the debt, and the Chancellor has failed his second task.

The Chancellor's final task was to set out a real plan for growth. What does he propose? A higher tax on jobs. That is his answer to Britain's unemployment problem—higher costs for struggling businesses and more money taken from families. That is yet another thing that we could have avoided if this Government had taken the hard decisions in the good years.

Let me just say this about some of the tax measures that the Chancellor has announced in the Budget, the last pre-Budget report and this pre-Budget report. The message to aspiring families from these tax changes is pretty clear: if you want to get on in life, if you want to own your own home, save for a pension or leave something for your children, then the Labour party is not for you anymore. All that work Labour did to drag the party on to the centre ground of British politics, as well as all the effort it made to persuade the country that it was for enterprise and aspiration, is gone. Instead, it has erected a sign over the country that says, "Closed to enterprise and wealth creation," all for the sake of narrow political dividing lines. Instead of telling the country that we are all in this together, Labour now pretends that it can solve our problems by setting one part of the country against another. At the next election, it will be the few who support this approach and the many who reject it.

Instead of a plan for growth and jobs, the Chancellor's plan means higher taxes, higher taxes on jobs, higher interest rates and turning his back on aspiration and enterprise. His third and final task—failed. There is no confidence, no credible plan, no growth and aspiration is being abandoned.

Why is it that every Labour Government have taken this country to the brink of bankruptcy? Each one in turn seems to ignore the most basic rule of finance: if you keep on spending more than you earn, sooner or later you run out of money. How difficult can it be for them to remember this simple point? The country now faces a choice. There is Labour's route, which has been set out for us today: higher debts leading to higher taxes and higher interest rates; the recovery choked off; and Britain reduced again to being the sick man of Europe. Or people can choose our route, which is to face up to the problem; set out to eliminate a large part of the deficit in the Parliament for which we are accountable; expect everyone to share the burden, but protect the lowest paid; keep interest rates lower for longer; send the message out loud and clear that Britain is open for business; and transform the economy that Labour built on debt into one in which we save and invest for our future. That is not going to happen under this Government.

The Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the shadow Chancellor. Mr. Prentice, you must calm down. You might have an opportunity later, but you must calm down now.

Mr. Osborne: The Prime Minister always called himself the nation's bank manager, and so he has been. He bet the nation's finances on a never-ending property bubble and a City bonanza, and now, like every other failed master of the universe, he is coming to the taxpayer and asking to be bailed out, but he should remember this: most bail-outs start with a change at the top.

Mr. Darling: I have listened to the shadow Chancellor speak for the past 10 minutes or so, and there is one word that he did not mention—one word that he finds quite impossible to let pass his lips: "growth". Not once did he mention the possibility of achieving growth. He did not mention it in his conference speech, and he did not mention it today, because it is the one thing that the Conservative party seems quite incapable of realising—that we must secure long-term sustainable growth in this country. The alternative that he offered—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am sorry to have to interrupt the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I must say, Mr. Blunt, that this constant heckling is not impressive to the people of this country. It conveys a very bad impression of the House. Stop it.

Mr. Darling: Growth is absolutely essential for our long-term future. The hon. Gentleman also barely mentioned unemployment and the need to take measures to get unemployment down. He did not say whether or not he supports the measures that I have put before the House today to get people back into jobs and to make sure that people do not find that a short spell on benefit ends up being a lifetime in long-term unemployment. He did not say where he stands on our priorities of ensuring that we protect the front-line NHS, ensuring that we have got schools for the future and making sure that we have got enough policemen on the beat. He says absolutely nothing about that.

Fundamentally, yes there is a big issue before us. Because of this downturn, we, like every other country in the world, face much higher borrowing than we would like. It has resulted in debt increases, but the question is this: at what rate and how quickly do we reduce that borrowing and debt, and how do we do that? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should have a word with the Leader of the Opposition, who seems to be talking to himself just now. On Sunday, when the Leader of the Opposition was speaking to the BBC and was asked about our proposals to reduce the debt, he said:

"I don't think it is fast enough."

On Tuesday—another day, another audience—when he was asked about reducing deficit, he replied:

"Of course, there is a danger, if you do too much too early, you would choke off some demand."

That is precisely the argument between the two political parties. Certainly on Tuesday, the Leader of the Opposition seemed to agree with our point of view that, yes we have to reduce the deficit, but we have to do it in a way that is orderly and does not damage demand.

Of course, that comes to the heart of the problem that the Conservatives have. They cannot tell us what action they would take. Not once in the 10 minutes that he spoke did the shadow Chancellor actually say what he would do either in protecting services or in reducing debt. Indeed, all we do know is that he is committed to taking action more quickly. He gave the impression just now that he wanted to cut the deficit, perhaps in the next Parliament, but if we do that we will end up having to cut something like £25 billion more. If that is his policy, he will have to spell out where he is going to take that money from. Who would feel the brunt if that money were taken away?

The shadow Chancellor went on to criticise us for having a lack of aspiration. Both of us expect to be judged—the British public will choose—but I have to tell him that I represent a constituency in which people are aspirational. They want to get on and they want to do the best they can for themselves and their families, but they honestly do not see that the first priority in that is giving a tax break to a tiny minority of the top estates in this country. I really think it is time that he rethought his priorities. We believe that public services help many people in this country. People accept that they have to be paid for and they accept the value of hospitals and of the schools that their children go to, but they also want to make sure that as we come through this crisis, just as we had to take difficult decisions with the banks over a year ago, we take difficult decisions now but in a way that reduces the deficit but does not damage our economy at the same time. Yes, all of us need to be fully engaged in that, and all of us are. What we have heard from the shadow Chancellor today is long on politics and very short on good ideas.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the Chancellor for sending me his statement, even though it was missing 43 paragraphs.

What is clear from the statement is that the economic position of the country is still very grave. We know now that we are 5 per cent. poorer than we were a year ago, and that the Government estimates of borrowing for this year and next year are higher than even they had forecast. What we needed was a national economic plan, but what we have got is an election manifesto.

There have been genuinely great Labour Chancellors in the past—Stafford Cripps and Roy Jenkins, among others—but they would not have been obsessed, as the Chancellor is today, with drawing tactical dividing lines. There are small things that one welcomes, such as initiatives on jobs for young people, on technology and on environmental policies. This is a good Budget for bingo and boilers; I think that is what it boils down to.

The underlying problem, however, is that for the past decade or more, the British Government have been over-dependent for their revenues on the fickle fortunes of the banking industry. We have had an economy that has been built on sand—on the assumption that property prices rise for ever, and on consumer borrowing—and the economy is now being rebuilt on sand, because the only signs of real recovery that we have are rising house prices and booming bank profits at a time when industry is continuing to decline.

Let me speak specifically about the banks. The Chancellor has clearly been provoked into action by the extraordinarily stupid and arrogant behaviour of the RBS board. What he has come up with, to the extent that it is intelligible, is an extraordinarily complex mechanism. Will he explain precisely how he will stop the banks converting their bonuses into basic salary? He talks about avoidance measures, but how is he going to stop that? Will he give us a worked example of what it means in reality?

Let us take as an example Mr. Bob Diamond of Barclays Capital, who has just walked away with £27 million on the back of a taxpayer guarantee. How would that be affected by the Government's proposal? Surely it makes more sense, as I think the Prime Minister entertained when he went to the G20 summit, not to try to tax bankers separately from other high earners, but to have a levy on bank profits because the banks depend on a taxpayer guarantee. Until they can be broken up and can stand on their own two feet, they have to pay for the insurance that the taxpayer provides.

The heart of the Chancellor's statement was about the borrowing requirement and the long-term problem of the structural deficit. What we needed was a clear, long-term way of dealing with this problem. What we had, to the extent to which we can understand the early statement that he made, was that there is an increase in

tax—approximately £6 billion to £7 billion a year—much of which will be in the form of national insurance. Let us be clear about what will now happen. Any worker earning more than £7,000 a year will pay 32 per cent. marginal income tax and 12 per cent. national insurance contributions. All the money raised in additional tax will go to public spending, and none will be used to pay down the borrowing requirement and the deficit. That is a complete distortion of the priorities that the Government should surely have.

In respect of timing, it is obviously right that we heed the advice of the Governor of the Bank of England and others that, if the economy is continuing to stagnate, it makes no sense to embark on rapid cuts in public expenditure and reducing the deficit. That is the problem that the Conservatives have got themselves into, but it is also right that, if there is rapid growth, the Government must get on with dealing with the deficit. What the Government have assumed today is that there will be high rates of economic growth—3.5 per cent. in 2011—but what is the basis for that assumption?

It is a little like the old story of the economist who is given a tin of food to eat and says, "Let's assume the existence of a tin opener." The Government are saying, "Let's assume economic growth." Why? Have they made any estimate of the very real risk that the economy will revert to a double-dip recession or continue to stagnate? What is the risk of those things happening—is it one in 10, one in five, or one in two? Surely we cannot operate on the basis of a single-line forecast that is based entirely on optimism and very little else.

To the extent that we can understand what the Government are doing about cutting public spending growth, it comes down to two items. Perhaps the Chancellor will confirm that. One of the items involves hitting low-paid workers by cutting the proposal for personal allowances, which I understand has been postponed or deferred. The other is the approach adopted to public sector pay. On the assumption that the Government have made, a 1 per cent. increase for a low-paid manual worker is a real cut. Of course, it is worth 10 times as much for a permanent secretary on £150,000 a year as it is to a worker on £15,000 a year. If there is to be restraint—and we have argued for it—surely it should be a flat sum across the board. We have argued that it should be £8 a week for everyone. That is the heart of the issue of fairness, which the Chancellor claimed was at the heart of his statement.

Of course it is right that we should be concerned with fairness in the tax system and in public spending priorities. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) keeps saying that we are all in this together, but that is simply not right: we are not all in this together, as some people have done much better than others.

The Government's claims to fairness are absolutely bogus. The Chancellor's big, totemic step of the last year was to introduce a 50 per cent. tax rate, but he has delivered a gift-wrapped invitation to tax avoidance by keeping capital gains tax at 18 per cent. He had an opportunity today to deal with that, but he has done absolutely nothing about it. Unless there is fairness, the public will not accept the fact that, for the next five years or longer, there is going to be a real hard slog for the economy. The Chancellor has not set out the way forward that we need.

Mr. Darling: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. We have set out a plan to reduce the country's deficit over a four-year period, and I believe that that will be done in a sensible way that will not damage public services or the fabric of the economy. Yes, the settlement will be tighter and it will be difficult, but I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not set out some of his proposals in relation to universities, for example.

I think that choices will have to be made, but I believe that people will recognise that, with public spending having grown over the last 10 years, we can proceed with a much tighter settlement than we have had in the past. However, as I said earlier, I believe that we can protect front-line services at the same time.

I listened to what the hon. Gentleman had to say about tax. He did not say what he would do, but that is one of the luxuries of being on his Benches. I think that using national insurance is a fair approach, and I said I would take steps to make sure that people earning under £20,000 would not be affected.

The hon. Gentleman asked about growth. I have set out my forecasts, which are not dissimilar to those of the Bank of England. Indeed, I remember that after the last Budget he and many others criticised my forecast that the economy would grow by between 1 and 1.5 per cent. next year, whereas the consensus among most commentators now is that that is broadly right.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the financial services industry. Yes, it has been a major part of our economy. I am not sure where he stands on these things nowadays, but I believe that it will remain an important part of the economy. It employs 1 million people in this country and, properly supervised and regulated, it is important. However, I think—and I think the hon. Gentleman thinks so too—that people responsible for banks should bear it in mind that they have had a lot of public support, directly or indirectly, and that their priority should be to rebuild the banks' capital. He asked how the system would work. He seemed to hint that he would have imposed a windfall tax on the banks. I think that would be a mistake, because it would amount to telling the banks to build up their capital position while at one and the same time taking the money away from them. Some of the banks that might be affected by such an approach are those that, arguably, did a little bit less to contribute to some of the problems in the first place.

The way that the system will work is quite simple—there will be a levy of 50 per cent. on bonuses of more than £25,000, and there will be anti-avoidance measures. The hon. Gentleman asked what will happen if people get the money paid in income, and the answer is relatively simple—they will pay income tax on it. That is how the system operates and, unless he is saying that there should be an incomes policy for all bankers, which would be difficult to operate, I disagree with him.

The hon. Gentleman said that I was searching for tactical dividing lines; I have rarely been accused of doing that. I think that the divisions between us and the Conservatives, and between us and the Liberal party, are perfectly there to be seen. We do not have to go looking for them.

John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): It is right for the Government to use this pre-Budget report to maintain investment in the economy. The private sector is on its knees at the moment because of the banking catastrophe that we are experiencing. It is

[John McFall]

only the Government, through the help that they are giving to business and individuals, who are keeping the economy going.

However, given the need in the future to cut the fiscal deficit, increase capital liquidity requirements for financial institutions, unwind the £200 billion of quantitative easing and eventually to move interest rates away from zero, will the Chancellor consider further developing a macro-economic framework to deal with those issues?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The priority is to deal with the aftermath of this downturn and I set out proposals for that. I will continue to take every step possible to ensure that we get the deficit down. It is absolutely a prerequisite for making sure that we have sustainable long-term growth in the future. It is something that must remain a priority for the Chancellor at all times.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Twenty-two hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. As usual, I should like to accommodate everybody, and therefore I reiterate my usual appeal and exhortation that each hon. Member ask a single brief supplementary question, and of course that the Chancellor of the Exchequer provide an economical reply.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why has growth been non-existent so far, when the Chancellor's policy is meant to be about promoting growth?

Mr. Darling: There has been no growth in the last year for perfectly obvious reasons. Because of the crisis in the banking sector that has affected this and every other country in the world, there has been a very severe downturn. I would have thought that that was very obvious.

Hazel Blears (Salford) (Lab): Politics is clearly the language of priorities, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has set out this Labour Government's priorities of supporting young people into jobs and apprenticeships. That stands in stark contrast to priorities of the Conservatives who have chosen to benefit the 3,000 wealthiest estates in the country.

Will my right hon. Friend ensure that his measures to support apprenticeships are directed to communities like mine in Salford where, in the last Tory recession, 75 per cent. of young people were without jobs and hope? We need these measures to build on our success.

Mr. Darling: Yes is the short answer. It is important that we carry on expanding the number of apprenticeships because, not just now when unemployment is clearly too high but also in the future, we will need qualified people with the skills that our economy needs.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The previous Gershon efficiency savings were found, after independent audit by the National Audit Office, to be largely unproven. Given that, it is difficult to believe that these new efficiency gains will be backed by evidence. To prove me wrong, will the Chancellor pass all his assumptions and proposals on efficiency savings to the NAO for independent audit?

Mr. Darling: I do not accept the general premise underlying the hon. Gentleman's question that efficiencies cannot be made. For example, we managed to reduce the amount of money that we were paying to drug companies from the NHS. I remember from my time at the Department for Work and Pensions that we reduced the number of middle management employees to ensure that the then Benefits Agency, which formed part of Jobcentre Plus, was more efficient. So I simply do not accept the premise that underlies his question.

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West and Royton) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend really believe that a one-off, short-term bonus tax is sufficient to achieve his aim of permanently changing City culture? How does he justify the prospect of cutting public services and still not imposing a windfall tax on banks, when those bank profits have been fortuitously inflated by quantitative easing, by the offsetting of £80 billion of past losses against tax, by the elimination of rivals in the financial crash and by a vastly expanded market in Government bond sales?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend should bear it in mind that if—when—banks return to profitability, which must be one of the objectives in the longer term, they pay corporation tax on those revenues. On tax and bonuses, I want to try to get banks to think long and hard about paying out large sums when, frankly, they ought to be building up their strength. I have said often enough in the House that I am not against the payment of bonuses in themselves—they can be a good way to reward and incentivise people—but if banks are going to pay those very high bonuses, it is right that the taxpayer should see some benefit from that.

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): How much worse off will constituents of mine who earn £25,000 be as result of the Chancellor's national insurance increase?

Mr. Darling: I said in my statement that, yes, national insurance will go up, and that is necessary because we want to ensure the services that the hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine receive. If they are unfortunate enough to go to hospital or they go to see their doctors or schools, they recognise that they get a benefit from that. I certainly do not think that they want to go back to the days of the past, when a lot of those services were very seriously run down.

Mr. Richard Caborn (Sheffield, Central) (Lab): I welcome the statement, particularly for the wealth-creating sectors and manufacturing up north—in 1997, we inherited industrial deserts, particularly in areas such as South Yorkshire—and the investment has been made by Rolls-Royce in the Advanced Manufacturing Park. May I prevail on the Chancellor to consider the short-termism of the marketplace? Indeed, I think that everyone appreciates that the statement today tries to tackle some of the problems, but long-term investment in wealth creation and our manufacturing is not four or five years, but five, 10 and 15 years. I hope that that is borne in mind and that the Treasury and the shareholding Executive will get that change of culture.

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend represents a part of the country that was at the wrong end of the 1980s recession. On many visits to his part of the country, I have found it impressive to see how former coke works and coal mining areas have been completely transformed and, on the same sites, high-tech industries and cutting-edge developments in advanced engineering employing a lot of people. He is absolutely right to say that we need to encourage that not just for the next five or 10 years, but for decades after that.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): The Chancellor applauded the flexibility of working tax credits, but no additional support has been offered to two of my constituents who work in a factory and whose hours have been reduced to a three-day week since July. They are not entitled to working tax credits, redundancy pay or jobseeker's allowance. Was it not an omission not to include support for them in the pre-Budget report?

Mr. Darling: We have tried over a number of years to improve the help that we give to people who lose their jobs or go on to short-term working. Yes, we are always looking to see how we can improve that, but it is partly constrained by what we can do. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who speaks for the Liberals from the Front Bench, rather gave the impression that he wants the Government to spend less rather than more, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we need to ensure that we help people to stay in work.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): May I compliment the Chancellor of the Exchequer on how he has acquitted himself not only today but for the whole period that he has been Chancellor? It has served the public interest well. Given that the Bank of England will shortly cease to print money to buy Government debt and that the Government will have to go into the real world to raise that money, what will be the impact over the coming year on long-term interest rates, given what he has announced on public expenditure levels for the same period?

Mr. Darling: First, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. On quantitative easing, the Monetary Policy Committee will have to reach a decision on when it stops that work and then on how it unwinds what it is doing. It is very conscious of the fact that it needs to do that in an orderly way that complements what the Government are doing. Indeed, I think that I made it clear when I announced the scheme that there will be some discussion when it is wound down to ensure that that is done in the right way.

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The OECD believes that early and ambitious fiscal consolidation will strengthen the recovery. Why does the Chancellor think that it is wrong and he is right?

Mr. Darling: Yes, but the OECD is not arguing for going far faster and therefore damaging jobs and the fabric of the economy. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that—whether it is the OECD, or the International Monetary Fund of which 186 countries are members—none of them support the sort of approach that the Conservatives are advocating.

Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor for listening to those of us who were pressing for an extension to the free school meals programme, because it is an important measure in helping to reduce child poverty, but does he agree that it is quite wrong for the Liberal Democrats to lecture us on reducing child poverty when the first thing that Hull, which is a Liberal Democrat-controlled council, did was to withdraw its free school meals programme?

Mr. Darling: These things sometimes happen with the Liberal Democrats, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what she said about our proposals.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I fully recognise the constraints placed on the Chancellor in balancing and restoring public finances, while not damaging economic growth. One concern, however, for devolved Administrations is to have some certainty about Government spending plans for 2011 and beyond. When will he be able to give that assurance? When looking at those plans, will he bear in mind the House of Lords report that has indicated that Wales and Northern Ireland have greater needs than other parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Darling: I hope that, one way or another, the Government have recognised Northern Ireland's special needs, not just in the regular spending rounds but, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, in other discussions as well. As I have said, the Barnett formula will apply to the announcements that I have made today where appropriate in the usual way. All the devolved Administrations know the spending that they are getting for the rest of the spending review, but spending reviews have been fixed for three years in the past to give some certainty. I think that people will accept just now that, given what is happening, it is not possible to set out definitely what spending might be in three or five years' time, but they have that certainty for the next year, which will help them.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I note that the Chancellor's statement included the welcome reference to the fact that anyone who moves off benefits into work will not be worse off. Will he please explain how that will affect people who live in expensive private rented accommodation and receive housing benefit at the moment, but lose all or most of their housing benefit on going into work and thus end up considerably worse off and, in extreme cases, can even be rendered homeless as a result?

Mr. Darling: I understand that concern, and I can tell my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will make a statement fairly shortly and give more details, but we are all very aware of his point about the withdrawal rates of benefits.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): The Chancellor has announced increased funding for current operations, but after the increased costs of the redundancy of kit and the uplift in troops announced by the Prime Minister earlier this month, what will be left for the repair and replacement of our inadequate helicopter fleet, which is putting at risk the lives of our servicemen?

Mr. Darling: First, as I said in the statement, we are making available further sums to the Ministry of Defence. The Secretary of State for Defence will in due course set out how the MOD is reorganising what it does to ensure that it can provide support, particularly on the front line. I have said often enough before that it is important if we send troops into Afghanistan that they are properly equipped and supported. That means some reprioritisation in the MOD. I think that the hon. Gentleman would accept that, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be able to say something about it.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): Does the Chancellor agree with the leader of the Conservative party that the problem is big Government and that there was too much regulation, or does the Chancellor agree with me that Government have a big role to play in protecting people and that the banking problems came about from too little regulation?

Mr. Darling: Despite being posed such a difficult question, I am probably more on my hon. Friend's side than the Leader of the Opposition's. The problem was partly caused by regulation that was not tough enough, but partly caused also by the fact that too many at the top of some banks clearly did not know what they were doing. There was a failure of corporate governance as well as a failure in regulation. That situation has undoubtedly had consequences, however, and every Government in the world have had to deal with those consequences. The question before us now is, how do we manage to deal with that situation in an orderly way?

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Chancellor was incorrect in saying that when the banks return to profit, they will pay corporation tax, because there will be £80 billion of losses to set off first. Does he not think that the citizens of the United Kingdom will be amazed by the fact that banks will be making billions of pounds in profit and not paying a single penny of corporation tax?

Mr. Darling: Of course I am aware of the tax treatment of losses, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the way in which tax losses are treated for capital adequacy purposes, so the situation is a little more complicated than the one he describes.

Helen Southworth (Warrington, South) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend make sure that services to safeguard and protect vulnerable children who are at risk are a priority and receive investment?

Mr. Darling: I know that our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is very concerned about that issue, as should we all be. It is very important that children who are at risk are properly looked after, and I very much hope that we can continue to do that.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): Even if the deficit falls as planned, based on pretty heroic growth forecasts, the national debt will continue to rise, on the Treasury calculation, to £1.7 trillion, which is 91 per cent. of gross domestic product. That is in the Green Book. The Chancellor is right to say that we need a budget for growth, but this was not a budget for growth. This pre-Budget statement specifically confirmed the cut announced earlier this year in both the resource and the capital departmental expenditure limit for Scotland. Why did the Chancellor not take the advice of even his own colleagues in Scotland and have a further year's reprofiling of capital expenditure to protect the recovery, instead of ensuring that the cuts come now and weaken Scotland's ability to recover?

Mr. Darling: I say this to the hon. Gentleman: yes, we did bring capital spending forward, and the situation in Scotland would have been infinitely better had the Scottish National party not turned its face against continuing to work with the private sector. The SNP had a vanity project to try to replace the private finance initiative, and as a result, as I know from my constituency and others, the only things being built under the schools building programme, for example, are schools that the previous Labour Administration authorised. The nationalists should have a long hard look at what they have done in Scotland over the past two years, because in just about every single case where they made a promise, they have failed to deliver it, partly because of dogma and partly because they have simply over-promised and overreached. It is no wonder that people are beginning to see through what the nationalists actually do.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Chancellor's announcement of the innovation investment fund for research into the development of the green economy, which is led significantly by Teesside's chemical process industry. Will One NorthEast administer that fund, giving local companies an easy opportunity to get advice and access to it? If not, which Department will administer the fund and from what date?

Mr. Darling: I understand that the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills will make the situation clear very shortly. The regional development agency, One NorthEast, will of course be closely involved in everything that we do in relation to Teesside. It is important that Jobcentre Plus, the regional development agency and other public bodies all work very closely together, but I shall ensure that my hon. Friend is given that information by the Secretary of State.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) (LD): I congratulate the Chancellor on adopting the proposal that I included in an early-day motion on the boiler scrappage scheme and on also adopting an EDM proposal for an effective 75p rate on banker bonuses. However, if such a rate is to be effective, measures to stop avoidance by increasing salaries or rolling over pay to a following year will have to be in place. What proposals does he have to ensure that such avoidance cannot happen? If he cannot do that, he will be far better off sticking with the proposals made by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable).

Mr. Darling: I do not know whether the proposals from the hon. Member for Twickenham are to be found in an EDM, but it was not clear to me what his proposals actually were. Anti-avoidance measures will be introduced as part of the Finance Bill. On the other measures that the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Richard

Younger-Ross) has proposed, I cannot claim to have read the EDMs, but I am glad that he supports the policies.

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): Will the Chancellor confirm that manufacturing has contracted more under this Government than it did under the Thatcher Government in the 1980s?

Mr. Darling: I am glad to hear that there is common ground on this issue, because, certainly in my first 10 years in this House, it was not accepted that we lost far more manufacturing than perhaps we should have in the early 1980s. I think that manufacturing in this country, despite the downturn and despite the difficulties, is well placed for the future. We have a lot of manufacturing of which we can be genuinely proud, and in the past 10 years, through our investment in science and our support for universities, we have seen a lot more projects come out of universities and develop for the future. Much of what I had to say this afternoon was about encouraging such growth in the future. The policy of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) is not to reverse the situation at all, but, it seems, to make it worse.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): In the month when the Holtham commission, which the Labour-led Administration in the National Assembly for Wales appointed, has reported that the people of Wales are losing out to the tune of £400 million a year as a result of the Barnett formula, why did not the Chancellor use this opportunity—perhaps the final opportunity for some time for a Labour Chancellor—to implement the proposal for a needs-based formula and finally deliver justice to the people of Wales and, as we heard from the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), to Northern Ireland as well?

Mr. Darling: I believe that, certainly over the past 12 years, Wales has seen a significant increase in funding because of the increases in spending on health, education, science and research. Wales has benefited from that—tremendously so. If I have a disagreement with the nationalists, it is that I fail to understand what possible justification there can ever be for Welsh independence. I cannot see how on earth it could benefit that country.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The return to growth that is forecast in later years is predicated on consumers generating more GDP growth than they have in the past. The Chancellor suggests that 2 per cent. of GDP growth will be driven by private consumption, but between 2000 and 2007 only 1.75 per cent. of GDP growth was driven by consumer consumption. Does he think that wise, given that consumers are paying down their debt? Why does he think that he should rely on consumers backtracking, when they have worked out that they have a debt crisis even if the Government have not?

Mr. Darling: I think that many members of the public will be reducing the amount of debt that they carry, and that is a good thing. However, it is also true that people can at the same time maintain their spending, and some people increase their spending. Of course, as unemployment starts to fall and employment starts to grow, more people will be in work and more people will be able to spend their money on goods and services in this country.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): As politicians are to blame, like bankers, perhaps the top 25 per cent. of our salaries should also be taxed at 90 per cent. However, the Chancellor mentioned in his speech a £550 million yield from the special tax levy, which is the equivalent of £1.1 billion in paid bonuses. Is he implying that the measure is a ban on bonuses? Otherwise, bankers will either redefine themselves as working for hedge funds or non-bank banks, or domicile themselves outside the UK to receive such bonuses.

Mr. Darling: The figure I mentioned is our estimate of what we will get after behavioural changes in terms of both payment of bonuses and, I suspect, people saying, "Okay, I will take my wage in salary." As I said earlier, the problem is not bonuses in themselves; the problem is when we start paying excessive bonuses or rewarding people for doing things that they really should not do. That is where we get the problems.

Points of Order

2.9 pm

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I know how keen you are for this House to hear news from the Government first. In the past, when a Budget statement has been made—this is, effectively, an autumn Budget—MPs have been sacked for leaking the information to the media first. Clearly, the BBC and Sky had important knowledge relating to this Budget, so will you look into this to see whether there has been a leak and what can be done about it?

Mr. Speaker: It is not, of course, a Budget. I note, however, the very important point that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I know that there has been a considerable amount of speculation, but I would be reluctant to say more than that. I am happy to reflect on the matter. I know how assiduous the hon. Gentleman is in these important matters.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I need to bring to the attention of the House a separate, very important and worrying matter. Enterprise Inns is Britain's most notorious pubco. Its reputation is shown by its incredible litigiousness. It has tried to sue local media and national media, and has indeed threatened hon. Members of this House. I do not know if you are aware of this, but Enterprise Inns has sought by way of legal threat and intimidation to prevent the Business and Enterprise Committee from carrying out its scrutiny of the activities of the pub company—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have listened very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has said, which is certainly a matter of the highest importance to him and to many others. However, I have to say to him at this stage that if he has a complaint about a breach of the privilege of the House, that is a matter about which, in the first instance, he should come to me, or it is open to him to write to me, but he should not in the first instance raise it on the Floor of the House. Those options are open to the hon. Gentleman. If he wishes to pursue the matter with me in one or other of the ways that I have suggested, I will be all agog to hear what he has to say.

BILL PRESENTED

Fiscal Responsibility

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by the Prime Minister, Ms Harriet Harman, Mr. Liam Byrne, Mr. Stephen Timms, Sarah McCarthy-Fry and Ian Pearson, presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the imposition of duties for securing sound public finances.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 13) with explanatory notes (Bill 25-EN).

Child Poverty Bill

[Relevant Document: The Twenty-eighth Report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights of Session 2008-09, Legislative Scrutiny: Child Poverty Bill, HC 1114.]

Consideration of Bill

New Clause 1

THE RELATIVE LOW INCOME AFTER HOUSING COSTS TARGET

'(1) The relative low income after housing costs target is that less than 10 per cent. of children who live in qualifying households live in households that fall within the relevant income group.

(2) For the purposes of this section, a household falls within the relevant income group, in relation to a financial year, if its equivalised net income for the financial year is less than 60 per cent. of median equivalised net household income after housing costs for the financial year.'.—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.12 pm

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: new clause 2—*The reduction in the causes of poverty targets*—

'The Secretary of State shall make regulations setting out reduction in the causes of poverty targets.'.

New clause 3—*2010 Target*—

'(1) The Secretary of State must, before the end of the period of three months beginning with the day on which the Act is passed, publish and lay before Parliament a report setting out an assessment of progress made towards meeting the 2010 target.

(2) The 2010 target is that in the financial year beginning with 1 April 2010, fewer than 1.7 million children live in households that fall within the relevant income group as defined by section 2(2).'.

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 7, at end insert—

'(b) the relative low income after housing costs target in section [The relative low income after housing costs target].'.

Amendment 23, page 1, line 10, at end insert—

'(e) the reductions in the causes of poverty targets contained in regulations made by the Secretary of State under section [The reduction in the causes of poverty targets].'.

Amendment 33, in clause 6, page 3, line 9, at end insert—

'(ba) the circumstances in which a child living in communal accommodation may be regarded as living in a qualifying household;'.

Amendment 2, page 3, line 15, after 'costs', insert

'except when calculating household income for the purposes of section [The relative low income after housing costs target] (the relative low income after housing costs target)'.

Amendment 3, page 3, line 20, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 34, page 3, line 22, at end insert—

'(4A) Before making regulations under subsections 1(a) and 1(ba), the Secretary of State must request the advice of the Commission as to what statistical surveys can reasonably be expected to be undertaken.'.

Amendment 4, in clause 8, page 4, line 30, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 24, page 4, line 34, at end insert—

'(iii) describe the progress that the Secretary of State considers needs to be made in dealing with the causes of poverty in order to meet the targets in sections 2 to 5.'.

Amendment 5, page 4, line 43, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 6, in clause 9, page 5, line 14, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 7, in clause 10, page 6, line 3, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 8, page 6, line 15, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 9, page 6, line 25, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 10, in clause 11, page 7, line 13, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 11, page 7, line 26, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 12, page 7, line 37, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 13, in clause 13, page 8, line 29, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 14, in clause 14, page 9, line 14, at end insert—

'(b) the percentage of children living in qualifying households in the United Kingdom in the target year who were living in households that fell within the relevant income group for the purposes of section [The relative low income after housing costs target] (Relative low income after housing costs target);'.

Amendment 15, page 9, line 32, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 16, page 9, line 34, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 17, in clause 16, page 10, line 12, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 18, in clause 24, page 14, line 38, after 'or', insert

'section [The relative low income after housing costs target] (Relative low income after housing costs target) or'.

Amendment 19, in schedule 2, page 20, line 9, after '5', insert

'and section [The relative low income after housing costs target]'.

Amendment 20, page 21, line 23, at end insert—

'(b) the percentage of children living in qualifying households in the United Kingdom in the renewed target year who were living in households that fell within the relevant income group for the purposes of section [The relative low income after housing costs target] (Relative low income after housing costs target);'.

Steve Webb: A wry smile crosses our faces when it is announced that this Bill is the main business of the day, but in fact it is, in the sense that child poverty is a crucial issue. That view is certainly shared by all those who served on the Committee that considered the Bill.

New clause 1 arises from the discussions that we had in Committee about the most appropriate method of measuring poverty. Hon. Members will know that there are in the Bill four measures or targets relating to poverty, which combine various facets of income, material deprivation, persistence of poverty, and relative and absolute poverty. Clearly, it is welcome that the Bill does not settle on a single definition but recognises that poverty is multi-faceted and that one statistic does not do justice to the whole problem.

In Committee, we discussed the most appropriate treatment of housing costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) and I proposed that, for the purpose of income measures, we should measure income after the deduction of housing costs. One of the arguments that the Treasury Minister who responded to our proposal made against it was that replacing the before-housing-costs measure would cause a problem, because we would not have comparable statistics for use in international comparisons. In other words, if we got rid of the before-housing-costs measure and imposed an after-housing-costs measure, our statistics would not line up with those from other EU countries and the OECD.

The point of debates in Committee is to reflect on such issues and then to come back on Report with revised amendments, and that is what we have done in this case. Rather than suggest that we replace the before-housing-costs measure with an after-housing-costs measure, we now suggest in new clause 1 that we do not replace the four existing targets but add a fifth—income after housing costs. That definition will be familiar to the House. It relates to information that is published regularly in the "Households Below Average Income" statistics, so it requires no additional statistical work. The figures are already there, but they would be given the same force as the other four targets in the Bill.

I should say in passing that amendments 1 to 20 are consequential to the inclusion of new clause 1, so wherever the Bill lists the four targets, there would be a list of five. The wording of new clause 1 exactly mirrors the target relating to the before-housing-costs measure and would simply insert "after housing costs". Another, slightly more involved, consequential change is that where the Bill says that certain things cannot be deducted, one of which is housing costs, it would have to state that that does not apply to the provisions of the new clause, under which housing costs would be deducted.

2.15 pm

I have been reflecting on the arguments that the Government might use against making the change proposed in new clause 1. First, however, it is worth making the case for an after-housing-costs measure. We believe that there is added value in looking at people's living standards after they have had to meet their housing costs, first and foremost because housing is a very large part of most people's budget and a very big determinant of their living standards. To look at people's standard of living without taking any account of whether they have high, low or next to no housing costs is to miss a very

important part of the picture. Because it is such an important determinant of living standards, the absence from the Bill of an income measure that takes account of housing costs is a significant omission.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I strongly support the new clause and my hon. Friend's arguments for it. Does he agree that the proposal is particularly salient in low-income areas such as my constituency, because many of my constituents cannot afford the basics after they have paid rent, for the simple reason that rents have not come down with the recession, whereas in many cases incomes have declined?

Steve Webb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that very important point. The Bill measures income, including housing benefits and so forth, but takes no account of the impact of housing costs coming out of that income. Many households are in poverty, and if one compares the statistics on income before housing costs and after housing costs, the poverty rate is much higher on the after-housing-costs measure. It is interesting that he should raise that question, because the general assumption is that taking account of housing costs is an urban issue that relates to big cities with high housing costs, but it is clearly relevant in areas such as his, where housing costs can also take a big part of people's incomes.

Housing costs are a big part of household budgets, and people often have quite limited choices in that regard. It could be argued, "Well, if you have big housing costs it's because you live in a big house. You have chosen a higher living standard, so why should we deduct your housing costs? That would be like deducting your caviar expenditure. You've chosen to spend more and you're better off as a result, so we shouldn't deduct it." However, the reality, particularly for many people in rural areas or others with low means, is that housing is not one of those things that they shop around for, like wondering what tin of beans to buy this week. People in poverty often have very constrained choices about housing, so the level of housing expenditure is not discretionary in the way that spending on a luxury item would be. It really is a necessity, and people have very constrained choices and have to live with the consequences of making them. Assessing income after housing costs have been met would give us another facet. I am not suggesting that it is the only way of looking at things, but it is an additional way.

The second reason why this is important is that the regional impact of housing costs varies considerably, and if we look only at income before housing costs, we do not capture that. Obviously, on average, housing costs will be substantially higher in London and certain other housing hotspot areas. One of the perverse aspects of the measure of income before housing costs is that it includes housing benefit. If that is the only measure we have, we end up with the strange situation where somebody with a huge rent that is being met wholly or largely by housing benefit seems to be relatively well off because all that housing benefit is included in their income, but no account is taken of the fact that it has an equal and opposite cost on the other side of the equation. That bit would never get measured under the Bill as it stands.

Let us take as an example two pensioner households living next door to each other, both with identical pension income. One person has paid off their mortgage and owns their house outright, and the other is on housing benefit and getting their rent paid in full. On the before-housing-costs measure, the person with the housing benefit is much better off than their neighbour because they have housing benefit, but after housing costs they are both in the same position because they just have their pension once they have met their housing costs. Clearly, the measure we propose provides a fairer assessment of relative living standards than saying that the person on housing benefit is better off. Indeed, one could argue that the person who owns their house outright is better off, because they have an asset, from which one might impute an income. The before-housing-costs measure puts people the wrong way round in that sense, so it is not an ideal definition.

I mentioned in response to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) that poverty is greater after housing costs than before them. That is not a reason to put it in the figures, but it demonstrates that, once income including housing benefit is measured, housing costs are seen to take up a bigger proportion of the incomes of the poor than of the rich, which is an important facet of measuring people's poverty.

We want reliable measures over time. My hon. Friend mentioned the problem of rent inflation. It has been the policy of successive Governments to deregulate social rents, so they have risen far faster than inflation for many years. If we only use the before-housing-costs measure, that makes people appear better off, because their housing benefit shoots up every time their rent does. That seems perverse in the extreme. If we measure income after housing costs, we will strip out the effect of rental inflation, which, as he said, has been very significant. There are strong reasons for having the additional target—it would give us a new lens through which to view child poverty without taking away from any of the existing measures, and it would catch an important facet of poverty.

As I said, I have thought about the responses that Ministers might give. One might be, "Well, we can't add another target to the Bill. We've got four targets, we can't have five." If they were to say, "We've got four targets, we can't have 99," I would probably accept that, but we wish to add one additional target. Why do the Government have four, and not three or two? Each target needs to stand on its own feet as an important indicator of poverty and give us new insights that we would not get without it. That should be the test of each target in Bill. As I said in Committee, I believe that the absolute low income target could go. If we could have only four, I would take that one out, but there seems no substantive reason why five good targets that provide a more comprehensive measure of poverty are worse than four. It is a difference not of kind but of degree, and given the added value of the after-housing-costs measures, the additional target is justified.

When we discussed the matter in Committee, Ministers said, "Ah, yes, but housing is in the Bill. You don't need to worry, it is already covered." I apologise if I am running through the Minister's bullet points for her. The Bill does contain provisions on housing, such as the material deprivation measure, which contains a few questions about housing, but nothing that will capture the cost of housing as a measure of income after housing costs would. The difference between the poverty

figures before and after housing costs is, as it says on the tin, all to do with housing costs. They should not be buried as a sub-factor in part of a measure. That is the problem. Although the material deprivation measure has a few housing-related matters in it, there are also a lot of non-housing matters. It would be incredibly difficult to strip out details of housing costs and be clear about whether they, rather than some other facet of material deprivation, were driving the figures. It will be as plain as a pikestaff that housing costs are causing the problem if we use figures for income after rather than before them.

The Minister might say that housing costs are about housing quality. I hope that I addressed that point earlier. The two are not wholly uncorrelated, but they are not very well correlated. Higher housing costs are often the product of necessity and of the part of the country in which people live. Often, as many people who live in private rented accommodation would say, they are not a good proxy for the quality of housing. Deducting housing costs and having both before and after-housing-costs measures, so that one can assess their impact on the figures, therefore seems to us an entirely sensible approach.

Drawing those threads together, the reason why there is not just one target in the Bill is that child poverty is multi-faced. The Government have alighted on four targets, but they could have alighted on three or five. Once one has accepted that there should be more than one, having five rather than four does not seem to make a substantive difference, and there is huge added value in the after-housing-costs approach.

I shall briefly address other amendments and new clauses in this group. I am sure that the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) will speak to new clause 2, which suggests that there should be

"reductions in the causes of poverty targets."

I had to read that several times to work out where the pause came—I think it means reductions in the causes of poverty rather than in the targets. Clearly we should examine the causes of poverty, not just the outcomes. We discussed the matter in Committee, in the light of which the hon. Gentleman has obviously refined the new clause. I look forward to hearing him make the case for it. New clause 3 argues for an assessment of progress on the 2010 target. We supported the idea in Committee and anticipate doing so again.

Amendments 33 and 34 were prompted by the discussions of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) may be planning to speak to them. They raise some important points about who counts as a child in a qualifying household and whether there are two tiers of children in the Bill. There are children who appear in the household surveys on which all the statistical data are based, and there are other children who come under the Bill's more general wording about deprivation but who are not covered by the statistical targets.

I do not mean to be in any way critical of the Joint Committee, but in a sense it is easier to point out the problem than to work out what one should do about it. The Committee referred to Gypsy and Traveller children, some of whom are in the statistics because they live in households picked up in the surveys—for example, if they are on local authority or private Traveller sites. However, the most transient might not get picked up in the figures. It is incredibly difficult to think how one might meld them into the statistics, so although it is important that they are not treated as second-class children, I am not entirely sure how we can add them to a measure based on household equivalent income.

Likewise, we discussed in Committee children who are in care. Their well-being is clearly crucial, but trying to measure the living standard of a child living in an institution, for example, is very difficult. A child being cared for in a private household, perhaps having been fostered, will be picked up in the normal statistical surveys, but it is difficult to identify the living standards of a child living in an institution whose meals are provided, but for whom there is no parental or household income that one can measure. It is difficult to know whether their income is 50 or 70 per cent. of the median, or how they could be melded into a living standard measure based on households. I am sure that my hon. Friend would accept that. The real question is whether there should be another statistical target or whether we should give greater weight to the parts of the Bill that refer more broadly to socio-economic disadvantage. I look forward to hearing his suggestions.

New clause 1 need not divide us along party lines, and I welcome the support that the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) has given it. She was a member of the Public Bill Committee and is much respected on these issues, and she rightly believes that housing is a crucial aspect of living standards. I can understand why she would take that view as a London MP. I hope that all parties will support the new clause. I hope for a conciliatory response from the Minister, because I know that my noble Friends in another place attach great importance to housing costs and they will want to return to the matter if we cannot get a better measure into the Bill—one that would improve it and help the Bill to achieve the goal that we all share of ensuring that child poverty is abolished.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): In speaking to this group of amendments, I hope to achieve two objectives. The first is to praise the Government for their determination in setting the objective in the Bill. It is an audacious thing to do, and I do not want the debate to pass without that being said. However, I also wish to raise some questions about the balance of the Government's approach, not in the Bill but up to this point in their campaign to abolish child poverty. I shall question whether they have been far too mechanical in seeing the solution as coming largely from benefits rather than through trying to balance people's immediate need for more money with an examination of the long-term causes of poverty. I take new clause 2 to be about that matter.

First, on a point of congratulation, no Government in the post-war period, or indeed ever, have set the objective of abolishing poverty in the way that this Government have. At the time they set that objective, I was Minister with responsibility for welfare reform, but I learned about it from a television broadcast. That suggested something about the relationship between the two powers in Downing street and the rest of the Administration, but I was pleased to read more recently that No. 11 was not even consulted before the objective was set in the famous Toynbee Hall speech by the then Prime Minister.

2.30 pm

The objective certainly marked this Government out from previous ones, but for most of our stewardship we have thought of poverty—naturally enough—in material terms, and of solutions in money terms. Therefore, the whole effort of the Government's engineering at the bottom of the income scale has been to raise benefit levels disproportionately to other incomes, so that one took children and their families across a poverty line. As far as one's first moral responsibility of helping the poor goes, who could fault the Government on that?

However, at least two things have happened since. First, the money has run out, even though the Chancellor was not too willing to admit that in his earlier statement, and perhaps he will not do so for another year. Secondly, the Government have engaged in the debate in a very responsible way, taking that crude initiative and broadening it out. One sees that in the Bill. It is about not only money, but what some of us in the House would refer to as causes.

Although I have not participated in a debate on the Bill before, I have read reports of them, and I have been struck by how they have been captured by Seebohm Rowntree. He was the chocolate manufacturer's son—his father, Joseph Rowntree, made his name building up that great firm in York and elsewhere. His son made his name—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I am reluctant to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but I am not quite sure how far he is going to stray from new clause 1. I am prepared to allow a certain amount of latitude, but he will bear in mind that we have new clauses and amendments before us.

Mr. Field: I thought we were taking all the clauses together, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes we are, but a degree of precision is essential.

Mr. Field: Of course it is.

One thing Seebohm Rowntree did was list the issues that the Government are trying to deal with in the Bill—in a sense, that underpins new clause 1 and the whole of the Government's approach. At the turn of the last century, he asked why people were poor. He listed low pay, being a single-parent household, unemployment, sickness and old age, but he went on to say that one should not read such things as the causes of poverty, and that they are in fact manifestations of poverty. He said that if we want to look at the causes of poverty, we have to go much deeper into the big questions about political economy.

Therefore, I much welcome the fact that when the Government started to fan out in the Bill how they view poverty, they got on to what I think we need to get on to—namely, looking at the deep, root causes of poverty in our society, with which amendments in this group deal. Indeed, I would argue that it is inconsistent for the Government to adopt such an approach to defining poverty and not to welcome the debate about the link between children in poverty and one-parent households—Labour Members find it easier to link low pay in such households to children in poverty. There seems to be something inconsistent about our approach. We are not prepared to try to teach the nation that if one becomes a single-parent, or makes little opportunity of the 13 years of state investment in education and goes into an unskilled job, the probability is that one will be poor.

I was therefore disturbed that, when in the past couple of days the Leader of the Opposition raised the question—he did so very carefully—of eliminating the discrimination against two-parent families, it was immediately read by some of the single-parent groups as an attack on the status of single parents. I know they have grounds for doing so, because when we were first elected in '97, we said we were going to abolish such discrimination, but we foolishly presented that in terms of attacking single parents and reducing their income. However, the proposals I mentioned were not to reduce the income of single-parent households, but to raise the income of households with two parents. In that way, the children in such households would be equivalent to children in households in which only one parent earned.

I rose to congratulate the Government on distinguishing themselves as the first ever who decided they could, by their means, change whether people lived in households in poverty. Secondly, I rose to congratulate the Government on broadening how they see the mechanisms by which poverty is transmitted. They have moved—thank goodness—from a rather crude definition and from concern only in money terms, and are beginning to look at the debate about the root causes of poverty, which I think we need to have in what remains of this Parliament and in the next.

That is why the Government's proposals for raising the performance of our secondary schools are so important. We need to guarantee that practically every child leaves with minimum school-leaving requirements. Those requirements should not be made up by adding slightly bogus vocational qualifications to five GCSEs including English and maths. In the hard world in which the employer interprets such qualifications, children who have them will probably be condemned to poverty in adulthood, and their children with them.

I also believe that we need to get over to younger people that opting for single parenthood is not a desirable life choice. Many have that inflicted upon them, but the way we allow young people to make that decision without spelling out what it means for them and their life chances, and more importantly for their children's life chances, fails that next generation. It is not good enough for the pressure groups to wheel out upper-middle class young single parents who are having a whale of a time and saying, "I'm so pleased I'm a young single parent. I can't tell you all the choices I have now I've got all that over with," and the rest of it. The young women who follow that model in my constituency do not have the bank balances to see them through.

I affirm my congratulations to the Government on their long period of stewardship and on staying with this issue. Perhaps a little later than I would have thought, they have widened the debate beyond what Rowntree thought were the superficial causes to the root causes of poverty, which I welcome.

I put that down as a marker for the next Parliament—hopefully some of us will be returned by the electorate. The Government made their choice at a time of record public expenditure. In the next Parliament, there will be record cuts in public expenditure. As Tawney said, when the great liners go down, who gets into the lifeboats is

important. It is important for us to help to shape the debate about the priorities and to decide who gets into those lifeboats when the age of big cuts in public expenditure is really upon us.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): As always, it is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb), who ably introduced new clause 1. As the hon. Gentleman said, we touched on this issue in Committee and I understand where he is coming from. Indeed, in Committee I made the point that families are primarily interested in the after housing costs income—how much money they have left to spend on food, clothing, transport and so on, to balance the weekly budget. That is the critical amount for many families.

We do track that figure. In Prime Minister's questions earlier, the figure of 4 million children living in poverty was mentioned, and that is the after housing cost figure, rather than the before housing cost figure of 2.9 million. In Committee, my hon. Friends and I backed amendment 28, tabled by the hon. Gentleman, which would have removed clause 6(2) which prevents housing costs from being deducted when calculating the net income of a household. We thought that that was overly prescriptive because it would tie the hands of the Child Poverty Commission, which has not even been set up yet, when it came to take a view on housing costs. We were happy to back the hon. Gentleman on that amendment.

As the hon. Gentleman has made clear, the households below average income series already publishes the figures for both before and after housing costs, and it will continue to do so. The Minister made that clear. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will pay careful attention to the after housing costs figure. At 4 million, it is much higher than any of us would like.

My concern about supporting new clause 1 is that we already have four income targets in the Bill, as I said in Committee. I was grateful for the comments by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead when he talked of the importance of widening the range of indicators and targets that we use to track our progress in reducing poverty, which will of course always be measured in income terms. We should have a range of targets in the Bill that drive policy in the right direction. My concern about new clause 1 is that that fifth income target would focus more on downstream intervention, whereas the real need is to focus on the root causes of poverty—those factors that trap people in a life of poverty, about which the right hon. Gentleman rightly talked. In that respect, I tabled new clause 2 and amendments 23 and 24.

New clause 2 seeks to add a fifth target to the Bill, just as the hon. Member for Northavon has tried to do, that would deal specifically with reducing the causes of poverty. I tabled a similar amendment in Committee and made an attempt to put some detail in the clause. Other members of the Committee said, "Well, you have included this, but you have left out that, and we do not think that that's very good." I took that point. I accept that the new clause is relatively brief at the moment, but amendment 23 specifies that the actual causes of poverty would be specified in regulations made by the Secretary of State. That is clearly something that the Child Poverty Commission, among others, would have a view on, and it would advise the Government. I think that that measure is essential. Indeed, my overriding criticism of the Bill is that it focuses purely on downstream income intervention and does not do enough at an early enough stage to address the causes of poverty.

I am supported in that point by several commentators, not least by witnesses at the formal evidence sessions in Committee. For example, both Mike Brewer of the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Donald Hirsch, a well respected academic from the university of Loughborough, were asked whether the Bill needs to address the longer-term causes of poverty in the early years, and they both said yes. Mike Brewer said:

"I wish that there were a broader range of indicators".

That is precisely what new clause 2 is seeking to introduce. Neil O'Brien, another witness from Policy Exchange, spoke about the current set of targets driving public policy to

"relentlessly...downstream intervention to give people income, rather than...tackle the causes."

He spoke of it being necessary to align

"your targets to your broader strategy". —[*Official Report, Child Poverty Public Bill Committee*, 22 October 2009; c. 101-104, Q199 and 203.]

That is the central point.

2.45 pm

The Department for Work and Pensions used to go some way along those lines. In its excellent "Opportunity for All" report, it published details of the number of children in workless households, teenage pregnancy, the proportion of children in disadvantaged areas with a good level of development, the number of children not in education, employment or training, childhood obesity and other such factors. Bizarrely, it stopped producing that report in 2007.

I quoted Mike Brewer's evidence to the Committee, but he has not stopped considering the point. In a recent article entitled "What's the point of the Child Poverty Bill?", he wrote that

"in my mind, the worrying aspect of the Bill is that it highlights income-based measures of child poverty over all other possible measures of child well-being. Although the Bill says that a government strategy must tackle socio-economic disadvantage amongst children, the way we will know whether child poverty is eradicated in 2020 will be determined by four measures of income poverty."

He also points out that

"there is a risk that politicians will always favour policy responses with immediate and predictable impacts on the incomes of parents over responses which mitigate the impact of poverty on children, or improve poor children's well-being, or reduce the intergenerational transmission of child poverty (such as measures to tackle low achievement amongst white boys in receipt of free school meals, whose results at Key Stage 2 were recently revealed to be lower than all other ethnic groups)."

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon) (Con): I am attracted by my hon. Friend's approach, but does he think that it would be possible to reach agreement on the causes of poverty? Is not that quite a political issue, on which people from different backgrounds or different sides of the House might have a fundamentally different view, especially on things such as family breakdown? Is it possible to achieve his goal?

Andrew Selous: I agree with my hon. Friend that it would not be easy, and my attempt to do so in Committee did meet with some flak from fellow Committee members.

[Andrew Selous]

I thought that it was slightly unfair as I had made an attempt to put a bit of detail in the Bill, but I was so roughly treated that I have tabled a slightly sparser clause on this occasion. However, I do not think that difficulty should prevent us from doing this work. My hon. Friend may be aware of the comments by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that

"the strategy against poverty and social exclusion pursued since the late 1990s is now largely exhausted."

That is the very group that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead quoted.

We can all agree on a certain set of indicators, perhaps around worklessness, addiction and educational underachievement, and in fact I thought that there was a degree of unity across the House on the issue of family breakdown.

Mr. Frank Field: I was trying to get away from this debate. The quotation that the hon. Gentleman cited from Mike Brewer was—apart from the last half-sentence—about a more flowery definition of poverty, whether children are fat or not fat. What I was trying to emphasise was that we should be primarily concerned with how to create as many exits from poverty and, equally importantly, how to cut off the supply routes to poverty. The hon. Gentleman may have had a rough going over in Committee, but that is what I thought his clause was about. What are the supply routes to poverty?

Andrew Selous: I mentioned one or two routes in response to my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), including worklessness, educational underachievement and addiction. Nearly 1.5 million children in this country live in households where their parents are subject to serious addiction. Just over 1 million are subject to serious alcohol abuse and 350,000 children have parents who are subject to serious drug abuse. I say to the Government in all earnestness that, unless they ally their anti-addiction policy with their anti-poverty strategy, we will not succeed in meeting the 2020 targets.

I thought that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead phrased his contribution extremely well. I am at one with him on ensuring that the debate is not about stigma or castigating a particular group, but about giving help to every type of family and trying to encourage the right sort of behaviour, which he ably described in relation to his constituents.

Mr. Field: Is addiction not to some extent a presenting problem? Are we saying that if we abolished addiction, we would automatically link that to the abolition of poverty? What does the hon. Gentleman think are the supply routes? Behind addiction is another tale to tell. There are two big routes that the House should want to tackle. The first is why some people can command only low-paid jobs—if they are going? Secondly, we know that the likelihood is that very young mothers on their own and their children will be poor. Should we not at least be telling people that?

Andrew Selous: I agree. There is no great difference between the right hon. Gentleman and myself. I think that his first point referred primarily to education and skills and his second to certain types of family formation. I am in broad agreement with him.

Mr. Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Our party is often critical of targets because of how they distort behaviour to meet often statistical and numerical outcomes. Child poverty is a complex issue involving supply routes, causes and the reasons why some people are sustained in poverty. Does my hon. Friend share my fear that because the Government want to fulfil and not breach their targets, such a Bill, which sets fixed numbers based on income, may risk putting a short-term desire for box-ticking ahead of the long-term need to address the deep-rooted causes of poverty and to support those who need long-term solutions, not short-term political fixes?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend served with great distinction in Committee, and it is excellent to see him in the Chamber. He has a point. It worries me a little when I hear Ministers saying, "We have raised 500,000 people"—or however many—"out of poverty." I take the example of a household that has been nudged from, say, 58 to 61 per cent. of median income. Imagine knocking on the door of that household and asking, "What does it feel like to be out of poverty?" That might be a harsh analogy because I realise that we will always need a target, that it will involve a line and that crossing it will bring only slight differences. However, my general point is that we could visit that household that is just above the poverty threshold and find that things had not really changed. I believe that the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) talked about the culture of poverty in his excellent contributions in Committee, and I think that he has a sense of where I am coming from.

I hope to press new clause 2 to a Division, and the same goes for new clause 3, if time permits—although I realise that it might not. There is a serious point behind new clause 3. It would put the much easier 2010-11 target to halve the original rate of child poverty by 2010-11 on a statutory basis. I was grateful to the hon. Member for Northavon and his colleagues in Committee for supporting us on that. I look forward to their support if we can press new clause 3 to a Division.

As I said, there is a serious point behind the new clause. We are not just playing politics. All the commentators think it unlikely that we will meet the target. In the light of the pre-Budget report, will the Minister tell the House how many additional children will be brought out of child poverty? I am looking at the section in the report on supporting families to reduce child poverty, on page 81, but that number is not leaping out at me. Perhaps she will enlighten the House in her response.

Interestingly, it has been 10 years, virtually to the day, since the then Chancellor of the Exchequer—the current Prime Minister—committed the Government, in the pre-Budget report on 9 November 1999, to the intermediate goal, as I think it was described, of halving child poverty by 2010. We have had 10 years, almost to the day, of trying to meet the 2010 target. New clause 3 would provide great value by ensuring that the relevant Secretary of State—I understand from Committee proceedings that it would be the Chancellor—comes to the Dispatch Box and explains why the 2010 target of halving child poverty has not been achieved, because, frankly, after today it is not going to be achieved, and then, importantly, how the policy will change, what additional things will be done in our schools and skills

training, and how we can strengthen families throughout the length and breadth of the nation. That would give us an early opportunity to learn the lessons on how we need to tweak policy to make further progress. That is the point. If we continue with the current rate of progress, with the strategy that the Government have had in place since 1999, we will not have a chance of meeting the 2020 target, which everyone in the House, I believe, wants to see achieved.

Mr. Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he is a charitable person and does not necessarily share my view. I believe that the Bill is before the House today to distract child poverty campaigners and the people of this country from the fact that the Government made a solemn promise to halve child poverty by 2010, but had no intention or means of meeting that promise. That was in a time of plenty when we were spending far more funds than the country could afford, and they still failed to deliver on that promise. Instead of being honest with people, therefore, they have set out to promise eradication in 10 years, when we know that public finances will be far tougher. The likelihood is that a fraud and a deceit are being put upon people, including the poorest children in the country, by a Government who are seeking to distract people's attention rather than tackling the root causes of poverty.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend made that type of forceful comment extremely well in Committee. Some believe that that is the case; they think that this is declaratory politics. I would like again to quote Mike Brewer from the IFS. He said:

"Those with a more cynical mind would accuse the Government of introducing this Bill to try to hide its predicted failure to meet its target for child poverty in 2010/11...It is not clear why the Government is unwilling to meet its own target for 2010/11, but keen to bind its successors to more stringent targets."

That is precisely my hon. Friend's point. As I have said, therefore, I would like to press new clause 3 to a vote. I know that he will be in the Division Lobby behind me, if we get the opportunity.

Mr. Frank Field: It is easy enough for us to attack the Government for not achieving the objective, but will the hon. Gentleman not at least praise them for setting out on this course and for willing huge taxpayer resources to achieve it? If one wants to criticise the Government, it should be for having a top-down approach—for wanting to do things without thinking how the poor themselves might be set free and given the ability to change their own circumstances.

Andrew Selous: I do indeed pay tribute to the Government's commitment. I do not think that that is disputed. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the record, he will see that I said that in Committee and I am happy to say it again from the Dispatch Box. I am interested in his point. He is right to talk about the importance of moving away from a top-down approach, which is why I am excited about the potential of part 2 of the Bill—I do not know if he has had a chance to look at it—which offers an exciting new role for local authorities. My hon. Friends and I share a concern that the Government have taken an overly prescriptive and top-down approach to dealing with local authorities, because we believe that having a degree of diversity and trying different solutions is likely to yield more results.

3 pm

Finally, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) for tabling amendment 33, which is one of a series of amendments that were suggested by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, on which he serves. He is right to alight on the fact that the current survey excludes those addresses that are communal establishments or institutions. The groups affected include, among others, Traveller children and children of asylum seekers, and the important categories of those in bed-and-breakfast accommodation and looked-after children in children's homes. I am sure that all of us in the House would want to ensure that those groups are included.

Amendment 34, the hon. Gentleman's linked amendment, asks the child poverty commission to look at what type of annual survey would include those groups of children. I could not help thinking when I read the amendment that it should also be directed at the Office for National Statistics, because the ONS is the independent body to which the Government look to collect such data. I have no doubt that the Minister will touch on that point when she replies.

I am also interested to hear how the Government view their responsibilities to the children of asylum seekers and the Traveller community. I quite understand that they are difficult communities for the Government to engage with, particularly if Traveller children are moving around the country, or perhaps going abroad and returning again. I am also interested in the exact position of children of asylum seekers. For example, if they are in institutions such as Yarl's Wood in the north of Bedfordshire, where my constituency is, how exactly do the Government measure income for them?

Mr. Streeter: I will be mercifully brief. I want to raise a number of points in support of new clauses 3 and 2.

As most colleagues will know, I spent quite a lot of time on the international development brief in the 1990s, when we were pursuing the 2015 millennium development goals. They were set in the early 1990s, when giving 10, 15 or 20 years to achieve them seemed a perfectly reasonable and commendable thing to do. Everyone thought that that was exactly the right way forward. As it turned out, the closer we get, the more we realise we are a long way from achieving those goals. With hindsight, it would have been far better to build in more immediate, intermediate goals as we walked along that journey, to ensure that we were moving in the right direction and testing ourselves. That is why I support new clause 3.

We have had the Government target, but new clause 3 talks about not just an immediate target for 2010 in this Bill, but being very specific indeed about what is achieved through that target. I said this on Second Reading, but putting in place a target and setting up a commission are not substitutes for a proper, well thought through and developed strategy for hitting such targets and delivering on the issue that we are all concerned about—there is no one in the House who does not want to reduce child poverty, however it is defined. If we are serious, there is an argument for restructuring the machinery of government, rather than just setting up a commission and setting a target, so that many existing Departments are better placed to bear down on the problem.

[Mr. Streeter]

I sit on the Select Committee on Home Affairs. Yesterday we heard evidence from the former drugs tsar, Mr. Hellawell. He talked about his time as someone brought in from the outside to take overall responsibility of the drugs strategy in the United Kingdom, and about the difficulty of getting all Departments co-ordinated and in alignment to bear down on the drugs problem. If we genuinely believe that child poverty in this country should be a huge focus for the Government and if we would all like it to be significantly reduced, there is an argument for restructuring the machinery of government to bear down on the problem, and not just setting a target or establishing a commission. I hope that the House will seriously consider agreeing to new clause 3, and if not, to something like it, to ensure that we do not just set waffly old goals, but put down, on the record, achievable targets and stepping stones towards achieving them in the mean time.

New clause 2 talks about the causes of poverty, which resonates greatly with the former Prime Minister's talk about being "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime". Of course we would like to be tough on the causes of poverty, but what are they? I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and wondered whether it was possible for us to agree as a House on what the causes of poverty might be. For example, what part do human nature and the choices that we make individually play in the causes of poverty? We have all observed, in our lives and in our constituencies over the years, people in similar circumstances and from similar backgrounds making different choices, with some flourishing and others ending up in deprivation and poverty. To what extent can one factor in those individual choices that are a reflection of individual human nature? Perhaps that is utterly impossible.

Ill health is also a cause of poverty. We have all known families who have been going along very nicely indeed, when the primary breadwinner—or perhaps both parents or a child—sadly becomes ill and the money stops flowing, causing disruption and poverty. Family breakdown, drug addiction and alcohol dependency, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and poor education—all these things can be causes of poverty.

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman lists a number of issues. We are all committed in this House to getting to the causes, but is there not a danger that, by making the list so wide, that becomes impossible, because everything from the weather onwards becomes a factor?

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman anticipates me. I embrace that concept, except to say that I am not sure how practical it is. I support probing the issue and I believe that the Government need to think about it more, but I reject the fact that we are measuring only financial poverty. This is a slightly different point, but we know that there are lots of children who are from modest or poor backgrounds but who have a stable, loving family and lots of encouragement and nurturing, and who would not consider themselves to be poor. There are other families with a great deal more financial support and income, but who live in chaotic households and would certainly consider themselves to be deprived of the most important things in life.

We are talking about very difficult issues. More thinking needs to be done. The Bill suffers from the fact that it does not seek to get behind the issue of poverty and try at least to trigger a debate about its causes. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire is on to a good thing in setting out new clause 2, which would require someone to do some more thinking on the issue. I think that the idea is for regulations to come forward to grapple with the problem—I am sure that my hon. Friend will nod at this point.

Andrew Selous *indicated assent.*

Mr. Streeter: That would be a very valuable exercise.

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): As ever, the hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful and valuable contribution, but does he agree that although poverty, and particularly child poverty, is about more than money, unless we address the financial implications of child poverty, frankly this Bill will be for the birds and we shall make no headway at all?

Mr. Streeter: I agree, or I think I do. I certainly want us to address financial child poverty—of course I do. It is distressing when we come across it, as we all do in our constituencies every weekend. However, I feel even more strongly that I would not want us just to focus on financial poverty, but to see some of the other values and framework principles in life as equally important. Some of us enjoyed them as we were growing up and some of us did not, and they make a huge difference to the sorts of people we become.

Mr. Graham Stuart: There is the possibility of distortion, not only in the child poverty agenda as we get nearer to the targets being met, but across the piece. Does my hon. Friend share my misgivings about such declaratory legislation, which means that child poverty, by being put on a statutory footing, has privilege over every one of the various other priorities that government has to balance at all times, such as the vulnerable elderly? If the legislation has force in the rather poorer decade that we now face, it could lead to the wrong decisions being made from a social justice point of view, in wider areas than child poverty alone.

Mr. Streeter: My hon. Friend is on to a very good point—this is a question of what the Government focus on. This slightly contradicts the point that I made earlier. If we are serious about child poverty, we need to restructure Government Departments and align them so that they can bear down on the problem. My hon. Friend might ask why we should not do that in relation to elderly poverty or to deprivation of all kinds. Of course these are important issues.

I have been in the House for 17 years. I believe that, for all sorts of reasons, the situation is now significantly worse—with the lack of social cohesion, with behaviour issues and the fact that so many children are now growing up in households of chaos—than when I first entered the House in 1992. I do not say that in any political sense. I would love to see whichever Government are in place after the next election focusing on this issue and really getting underneath the surface to try to tackle it.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in about 1980, about one in three children were growing up in poverty, compared with just under one in five now? By any standard, a society with a third of its children growing up in poverty is much more dysfunctional.

Mr. Streeter: I am afraid that I do not really trust those statistics terribly much. From my own experience, looking out on this country and on my own constituency profile and work load, I believe that our country now faces greater challenges in terms of its social cohesion and the quality of life of the 15 to 20 per cent. of the population who are growing up in households of chaos and not being given a chance.

I am talking about new clause 3, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in case you were under any misapprehension. The corollary of what I said earlier about choices is this: I accept that many people growing up in this country do not have the same choices as those who come from secure, stable, nurturing backgrounds. I totally take that point on board.

I think that I have delivered more or less all that I wanted to say. I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire is on to a good point in new clause 2, and that we should build specific delivery mechanisms into the Bill, as set out in new clause 3. I hope that the Government are in listening mode.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): I rise to speak to amendments 33 and 34, tabled on behalf of the Joint Committee on Human Rights by me and the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), the Chairman of that Committee.

The Joint Committee attempts—it generally succeeds—to analyse every piece of primary legislation that might engage human rights, and to issue a report for Parliament and the Government in which we make recommendations, particularly when we feel that the legislation has human rights compatibility issues; we also comment when the measures enhance human rights. We tend to do that before the Report stage of a Bill in the first House, to enable Parliament as a whole to consider our recommendations and debate the amendments. It is good to see the amendments being debated, although there is not always time to do so on Report.

The Joint Committee report was published on 10 November 2009. It makes it clear that the Committee welcomes the Bill and generally recognises it as a human rights enhancing measure. We also welcome the detail provided in the human rights memorandum that the Government supplied and the fact that the Government recognised, implicitly and explicitly, the role that the Bill can play in meeting our treaty obligations under the United Nations convention on the rights of the child and the United Nations convention on economic, social and cultural rights. It is good to have the opportunity to debate measures that show the value of our human rights commitments arising from the treaties and the Human Rights Act 1998, particularly in the light of the many attacks—usually based on myth—that are made on the Act in this House.

3.15 pm

The matter addressed by the Joint Committee's two amendments is that the principal duty set out in the Bill is to meet four targets defined by income-based indicators of poverty. They relate to children in what the Bill describes as "qualifying households". Those are not defined in the Bill—they are to be defined by regulations—but it is clear that they will include households that are covered by certain surveys. The report states:

> "The surveys currently used are based on the Small Users Postcode Address File, which includes most addresses which have postcodes and receive less than 50 items of post a day, and exclude addresses which are 'communal establishments or institutions'."

That is where our concern arises. Children who do not live in qualifying households under that definition will not be the subject of the targets. That raises the question whether they would suffer discrimination under article 14 and whether the legislation is therefore incompatible with our obligation not to discriminate under article 14 in respect of their enjoyment of other convention rights.

Our argument is not that that would be a matter of direct discrimination; it clearly would not be. However, it would constitute indirect discrimination. The example we give, which has already been mentioned, is that children from disadvantaged groups—that makes it worse; it is not children generally, but children from disadvantaged groups, such as the children of asylum seekers, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, and children living in bed and breakfast accommodation and care homes—would not benefit under the present definition from the duty imposed on the Government to tackle child poverty according to the existing four targets, although if my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) gets his way, there will be five targets. The Joint Committee's assertion is that that would breach article 14 in respect of the enjoyment of the rights under article 1 of protocol 1, which include the right to enjoy one's possessions. There are clear examples in case law of the kind of benefits that are covered by that, and an article 8 case is also relevant.

If that is a problem, we need to provide a solution. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon said, that will not be easy. It is not, however, the job of the Joint Committee to provide that solution. It is for the Government to propose it and for Parliament to amend it. The Joint Committee has, however, tabled two amendments that we believe go some way towards providing a solution. They would place a duty in the Bill for an effort to be made to ameliorate any discrimination that might, almost by necessity, follow from the use of the existing surveys.

I shall not go through the report in detail, but it makes a number of brief arguments against the proposition that we set out in correspondence with the Government. First, we said that the Bill does not engage article 1 of protocol 1, because it sets out no specific benefits. It simply establishes a framework, and the measures in the Bill are not sufficiently determinative of any decision to allocate funds or resources to particular groups, and not therefore to others. Our view was that the measure would have to have sufficient scope of application; it would not be necessary to identify specific discrimination for article 1 of protocol 1 to be engaged.

The question that is raised is whether the use of binding targets is sufficient to create this problem if a group is left out. We believe that there is a question of discrimination, which is not permitted, if some children are treated better than others particularly disadvantaged children such as those of asylum seekers, Gypsies and

Travellers, and those living in bed and breakfast accommodation. We definitely think that that would be a problem.

The Government have argued that no provision in the Bill would result in some children being left out, because the qualifying households will be defined in regulations. They say that there can be no argument with the Bill, because the definition will follow in the regulations. We have not accepted that argument previously, and nor have the Government, when it suits them. We state in the report:

"Our concern about the compatibility with Article 14 ECHR of excluding children not in qualifying households from the targets is not affected by the fact that qualifying households will be defined in regulations rather than in the Bill itself."

We have made clear that if

"the provisions in a Bill are likely to give rise to a breach of a Convention right in practice, for example because of a regulation making power that is likely to be exercised in a way which is incompatible with Convention rights",

that

"is of as much concern to us as a breach on the face of the Bill."

The Government's third argument is that it is not the intention to discriminate against those children, and I certainly accept that the Government are of that view. Indeed, they point out that the duty to have a child poverty strategy will apply to all children; other parts of the Bill not affected by these amendments do not seek to discriminate. Although we support and welcome that, it does not solve the problem that part of the Bill does appear to discriminate against children. The fact that it is not the intention for the Bill to discriminate against them is not relevant; it is, as we say,

"enough that it is the effect of its provisions that the children covered by the targets are prioritised over those children not caught by the data".

The fourth and final argument that we have identified the Government using is that the discrimination against children not living in qualifying households is justifiable and proportionate because it is simply not practical to conduct surveys that cover all children. We do not think that that is good enough, because we believe that efforts could be made to identify the children we are concerned about. We have made that clear in a number of places in our report.

Steve Webb: The dilemma is that for the vast bulk of the nation's children, living standards can be assessed using household surveys on a common standard, internationally defined and all the rest of it. Is my hon. Friend's argument that, if it is not possible to put children in the groups he refers to on to that same metric—that is the key problem; we know where they are and we could survey them, but converting their living standards into the same metric is very difficult—could we not apply a rational approach to the vast majority of children; or would my hon. Friend's approach preclude us from doing that at all because it is discriminatory?

Dr. Harris: I do not know the answer to that question, but we recognise that the number of additional children that it would be necessary to survey is relatively small, amounting to about 0.5 per cent. Because the whereabouts of many of those children is already known because of the other responsibilities of public authorities, it would be difficult to make a case for regarding as disproportionate the task of ensuring that the data are available, so that all children can be measured against child poverty targets. I accept my hon. Friend's point that it would not be easy to apply household data to non-household individuals. I am sensitive to the fact that existing data sets are not conducive to that task, but the amendment does not say that the data sets are conducive. It is designed to get the Government to take extra steps to ensure—perhaps by amending the targets to have two tiers, because although it would be differential, it would not be discriminatory if the intention and effect are good—the best means of identifying, aiding and lifting out of poverty those other children who are just not being measured.

John Mason: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying and I believe I understand his point. I just wonder whether we simply need a completely separate target for those children. Might that not be the best way to deal with the problem?

Dr. Harris: That might be the way forward. We argue that the Bill as a whole, because of the targets set in it, ends up being discriminatory—not intentionally, but in effect—so if the relevant part of the Bill dealt specifically with those children, it would seem to solve the problem. It is not a matter of saying that those children need to appear in every target, but the relevant part of the Bill that puts a duty on the Government to allocate resources to children living in poverty should not by design, albeit unintentionally, exclude some of the most disadvantaged children. That is really the nub of our argument.

The problem is not that, because the children are not covered by the duty, they may not receive the resources. Instead, the problem is that, given our present difficult financial straits, resources may be moved from those children who are not subject to the targets in order to provide the resources to deal with the children who are covered in the target. We have seen that happen, or at least allegedly happen, before—in the treatment of lone parents, for example, when lone parent benefit for the very poorest was cut in order to increase it for the next poorest group. That happened some years ago and I well remember the debate about it. That is the real problem.

Finally, I would like to deal with the point raised by the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) in his first, less irate, intervention. He made a very good point. I have always had concerns about target-based approaches to policy, because if targets are not measured correctly or if the target ends up being the wrong one, it can distort policy and resource allocation. We see that in the health service all the time, where the most urgent patient is the one who has been waiting 17 and a half weeks, rather than the one who has waited only three weeks but whose case is clinically more urgent. That is why when dealing with the vulnerable, it is vital that we identify the right groups. That is why I hope the Minister will consider carefully the constructive suggestions made by the Joint Committee.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I rise to speak briefly to this group of amendments. I confess that I have not been involved in the debate all along, but would like to raise just a few points.

When it comes to the key principles and objectives of this Bill, I believe the Government's heart is in the right place, but as right hon. and hon. Members have already said, the target date of 2020 will not be achieved—it is going to be very difficult.

Before I entered this House and became engaged in full-time politics, child poverty to me was a third-world country—a country trying to develop and move on and enter western society. When I came into politics, however, I was astounded at the number of children who were living in poverty across the whole of the United Kingdom. That was a real eye-opener for me.

I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who is not in his place at the moment, in much of what he said about poverty. Other Members have raised the point about finding reasons for such poverty. What is the root cause? We have heard a number of different responses to that question.

Ten years ago, the Government pledged to eradicate child poverty within a generation. It had doubled in the preceding 20 years, and the United Kingdom had the worst child poverty record in Europe.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend has talked of the Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty within a generation. Does he agree that part of the challenge, not just in Northern Ireland but throughout the United Kingdom, is that poverty is a generational problem? In many societies, estates and communities, the grandparents, the parents and, now, the children have all suffered from the same difficulty, from which no one has managed to extricate them.

David Simpson: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. There is no doubt that child poverty is a generational problem, and that it is still a reality in Britain today. Figures have been issued ranging from 4 million to 6 million. However, many of the issues have been devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive. Like my hon. Friend, I had the privilege of chairing the Social Development Committee in the Assembly, where all those issues were raised.

3.30 pm

In Northern Ireland, where the problem has been historically worse, some 100,000 children are living in poverty. The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) mentioned housing. Far too many young people's lives are blighted by homes that are cold and damp because their families cannot afford heating. As a result, their health suffers. They go into adulthood with chronic health problems that may plague them for the rest of their lives. Children who grow up in poverty do not have the same opportunities as their peers—the right hon. Member for Birkenhead mentioned education in this context—and that can turn disadvantaged children into disillusioned adults.

Mr. Graham Stuart: How is a balance to be struck between giving families who are living in poverty a sense of empowerment and a sense that they are the authors of their own lives—I am thinking, for instance, of the many first-generation immigrant families who live in poverty but, driven by their values, make sure that their children do not follow them—and giving them support? We need to support them, but not in a way that sustains a lack of aspiration and a lifestyle that will keep successive generations in poverty. How do we provide support in a way that is both humane and politically effective?

David Simpson: I wish that I had a crystal ball. It is very difficult to identify the root of the problem and find a way of encouraging people to emerge from that lifestyle. The hon. Gentleman referred to addiction earlier, and that is also a major problem. As with a disease, we need to find the root cause in order to eradicate this problem, and I believe that it will take until well after 2020 to complete the job.

The Northern Ireland Executive remain committed to the 2006 strategy document "Lifetime Opportunities". Its key objectives are enshrined in the "Programme for Government", which sets out some ambitious targets including the lifting of some 67,000 children out of poverty by next year and—as the Bill proposes—the elimination of child poverty by 2020. That will be very difficult, but the aims and objectives are there.

Money was mentioned earlier today. Let me end with a comment made by a parent from Belfast. She says:

> "I know that money cannot buy happiness and my children have loads of love, but having enough money is important to ensure that my children are well looked after and have the things that they need in life."

We owe it to our children and the next generation to act on that.

As I have said, I believe that the Government's aims and objectives show that their heart is in the right place, but we need to dig for the root cause in order to deal with the problem.

Mr. Graham Stuart: It is a pleasure both to follow the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) and to participate in this debate. I shall address my remarks chiefly to new clauses 2 and 3. The hon. Gentleman and other contributors have mentioned the Government's heart being in the right place, and I think I agree with that, but there are three drivers behind this Bill, and whereas the first of them is a genuine commitment to tackling child poverty, the other two are more ignoble.

The Bill is designed in part to distract from the Government's failure to meet the 2010-11 target, and it is also being introduced in the hope that it will serve to create the famous political dividing lines, as is characteristic of so many proposals and legislation since the current Prime Minister took office. The Bill has been introduced in the hope that the Conservatives will fall into a political trap by expressing doubts about the mechanisms it employs or its declaratory nature—or any other of a number of well-founded concerns about it. The Government hoped the Conservatives might be foolish enough to oppose the Bill so that they could be shown to be more interested in the few than the many, thus reinforcing the disgraceful and unhelpful narrative to which the Prime Minister is so dedicated. Therefore, the Government's heart is not in the right place in two out of those three aims. Furthermore, the fact that the Government are so keen to create these dividing lines prevents us from being able to talk about the fiendishly complex problem of tackling child poverty.

I do not doubt the Government's commitment to tackling child poverty, but in the boom period that we have recently enjoyed, the low-hanging fruit in policy terms was halving child poverty, and they did not meet their target in 2005—although they missed it by a wafer-thin margin, so I will not place too much emphasis on that. They are going to miss the 2010 child poverty

[Mr. Graham Stuart]

target as well, and they reject spending the money that the Institute for Fiscal Studies says they could spend in order to meet that target next year. Therefore, despite the fact that they made a solemn pledge, they are saying that they will not spend the £4.3 billion on transfers to ensure that they halve child poverty. They could do that, but they have decided not to, because they recognise, as all Governments must, that they have to strike a balance between all the different priorities they are addressing. Why, therefore, would a future Government be able to do that in 10 years' time, after what will doubtless be a much tougher decade than the past 10 years from a financial point of view? I therefore believe that that will not be done. The Government are setting us up for failure, and they are giving a false promise to people that eradication is in sight. I find the entire Bill deeply unsatisfactory.

New clause 3 is tremendously useful in asking for a report, and thereby asking the Government to talk about what they are doing now—to talk about the deadline not 10 or 11 years hence, but for tackling children being brought up in deprivation today. What are the Government doing now—this month, this quarter, next quarter, all the way through to the end of the next financial year? If they oppose the new clause, they will show that they are not interested in transparency and in looking at the here and now. They will show that they are interested not in the political realities of delivering for the poorest in our society, but in playing political games so that they can welcome the clamour of support for their long-term vision. We have had a lot of long-term visions, and the long-term vision of today is that we have ended up with record numbers of young people in unemployment.

Whenever my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is sitting on the Front Bench, I am always minded to try to follow his lead by being less strident and more charitable—he manages to achieve that both rightly and effectively. It is, therefore, worth commenting on a few positive things the Government have done. They have invested in early child care such as the Sure Start children centres, and they have made a genuine effort to put in place early intervention, which relates to matters of interest to the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen). We must judge the outcomes of today, however, and what we now have are more NEETs—young people not in education, employment or training—than when the Government came to power.

We should also consider the number of people who are on the very lowest incomes. When most people think about poverty, they think about the very poorest. When they have a Labour Government who say they want to eradicate child poverty, little would they imagine that that Government would be smug and proud of their record when the number of children in families on the very lowest incomes—not below 60 per cent. of median income, which is the technical description of relative poverty, but below 40 per cent. of median income—is at its highest for 25 years. That is the reality. The poorest are poorer under Labour, despite the investments and the genuineness of the commitments. Yet we have before us this vainglorious piece of legislation, which is designed to distract and to allow this failing Government, who have so often failed the poorest, to wrap themselves in a cloak of social justice. They do not deserve to wear it.

All this means that we are not doing enough of what the hon. Member for Upper Bann and so many others, including the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), were talking about. We should be trying to wrestle with the complexity of these issues so that we do not create perverse incentives—those affecting the poor and the rich. We want social justice and we want effectiveness, and we want it to be provided in a humane way. We do not want to play politics with looking after the poor in a way that ends up with more of them kept that way.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in meeting the challenge of child poverty, it does not matter to which party one belongs? Child poverty is a problem facing all parties in this House, so it is vital that we reach a consensus on how we take children out of poverty and allow them to succeed in life with the backing of Government and Government policy?

Mr. Stuart: I partially agree with what the hon. Gentleman says, and I certainly welcome the sentiment behind it. I am not always convinced that consensus does lead to the best results. A clash of ideas more often leads to positive outcomes than does a cosy consensus in this place. All the parties signed up to the Climate Change Act 2008, but have we seen a demonstrable change in emissions since it was passed? We have not seen it yet, but I hope that we will. I shall not go further on that; I shall stop before I am stopped, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Steve Webb: It is always a shame to interrupt the hon. Gentleman in full flow. May I encourage him to be a bit wary about this so-called very low-income measure of less than 40 per cent. of median income? I hope he is aware that although that accurately represents some people's living standards, surveys of income and expenditure provide good reason to think that the measurement of income of those very low-income households is often not a good proxy for their living standards. The classic case is that of the self-employed, whose books show less than 40 per cent. but whose living standard is clearly not that at all. I am trying not to be patronising, but I discourage him from putting too much weight on this measure of less than 40 per cent., where the data really are murky.

Mr. Stuart: I would always defer to the hon. Gentleman on matters of statistics, but when the official Government statistics have been reasonably consistent—he may correct me if I am wrong about this—and have shown an increase in the number of people in that category, either we have had an explosion in black market activity among families or we face a genuine problem. It is perfectly reasonable for those of us who have not slaved for many years in national statistics offices to take Government figures at face value, particularly when they show us an ugly picture of an increase in poverty among the poorest. He may patronise me as much as he likes, but until I am given comprehensive evidence to show that there has not been an increase in poverty among the poorest in this society, I shall remain concerned—even if he wants to dismiss my concern for technical reasons.

It is worth saying that we could have a clash of ideologies here, although there is so much political fear ahead of a general election that not much clashing is occurring. Historically, the Conservative party has believed—or certainly one could caricature it thus—in trickle-down economics. I remember a friend of mine sneeringly saying to me a little while ago, "I suppose you believe in trickle-down economics." As a good Conservative, I do, to an extent. However, although the previous Conservative Government transformed the country from being the sick man of Europe—we took over from the previous economic wreckage of a Labour Government—to being a much more powerful and dynamic economy, child poverty increased, and nobody who sits on the Conservative Benches is proud of that.

We want to combine a proper recognition of the need for incentives, for hard work to be rewarded, for enterprise to be supported and for the state not to smother economic activity with ensuring that, as we grow the economy, we carry all with us and do not rely on trickle-down economics to give us the magic solution. That certainly did not happen under the previous Conservative Government.

John Mason: I noticed the hon. Gentleman's phrase about hard work being rewarded, and there is a problem in that a lot of the children in poverty have one or more parents working. Would he be happy to support a higher minimum wage and, in fact, a living wage?

3.45 pm

Mr. Stuart: That is a fair question and it would need to be considered. We do not want to price people—particularly single parents who are inflexible in what they can do in the workplace because of their family commitments—out of accessing the marketplace. It is not a battle between those who do not care and those who care and want a higher minimum wage. It is a really tough judgment call to get the right thing for the country as a whole and for the poorest in particular. That is an argument that I would be happy to engage in with the hon. Gentleman. I do not have any firm views on it, and his expertise might easily eclipse mine.

We talked about social cohesion and, as hon. Members have mentioned, households in chaos. We have to deal with that. What do we do when we take measures? I fear that this Bill could end up enabling transfers of money to households, rewarding and reinforcing chaotic lifestyles. The Minister has had nothing to say about that. In fact, one of the Ministers who is on the Front Bench—the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)—said in Committee, extraordinarily:

"The Government are not wholly convinced that family breakdown is a cause of poverty".

She actually said that. If she wants to intervene, I would be happy to allow her to retract that today. She said:

"The Government are not wholly convinced that family breakdown is a cause of poverty; on the contrary, we tend to hold the view that poverty is a cause of family breakdown."—[*Official Report, Child Poverty Public Bill Committee*, 20 October 2009; c. 15, Q44.]

Of course poverty is a cause of family breakdown. Of course the tensions and pressures of poverty might exacerbate tensions in a family. However, to suggest that family breakdown does not push people into poverty is entirely to misunderstand what happens to families. The fact that we have a Minister on the Front Bench with such a perverse and peculiar view undermines my confidence that the Government know what they are doing.

Mr. Jamie Reed: The hon. Gentleman is making a very interesting case, as usual, which is being enjoyed by Members of all parties. Does he agree that this Bill is fundamentally about the kind of country that we want to be and that it is also about priorities and assurances? Where does that rate in his priorities?

Mr. Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. I shall try to answer him as straightforwardly as I can. I personally do not support putting child poverty targets on a statutory footing when we have not assessed all deprivation and when we have not considered the plight of the disabled, the elderly poor or any number of other groups. We have not considered the other priorities—we could be at war in eight years' time. All Governments want the best outcomes for the most people and have a particular interest—they certainly should—in looking after the most vulnerable and the weakest in our society. Should we—the hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me, as I know that he is not a cynical Member of this place—prioritise this issue for cynical electoral reasons so that the Government can capture a headline and distract from their failures?

Ms Keeble: Would not the hon. Gentleman agree that all the studies that are based on Department for Work and Pensions stats, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation study, show that it is children who are most likely to be in poverty in the UK today? That is the point of this legislation. They are the single foremost group. We can identify within that group which household structures and which income structures lead people to be in poverty, but overwhelmingly it is children who are at risk of poverty.

Mr. Stuart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. Single parent households are twice as likely to be in poverty, according to the Government figures, as two-parent households. We have a Minister who suggests that family breakdown is not a cause, and suggestions have been made that to try to eradicate the disincentives and built-in biases against couples in the benefits and tax system is an attack on single-parent families. I would have hoped that the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), who takes a profound interest in such matters, would support the Opposition, who believe that we need a level playing field. We certainly do not need to reinforce the pressures on couples to split up because of perverse incentives in the benefit system.

Ms Keeble: I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would quote the figures from Department for Work and Pensions tables or from the Rowntree study that show that single-parent households are twice as likely as two-parent households to be in poverty. I acknowledge that there might be a greater likelihood of that, but I would be very surprised to hear those figures, and I would be grateful if he would quote them.

Mr. Stuart: I hope that it is not because of blind prejudice that the hon. Lady has not looked at the basic figures.

Andrew Selous *rose*—

Mr. Stuart: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend, who is a master of such figures and will share them with the House.

Andrew Selous: I am happy to intervene briefly on my hon. Friend to give the Government's figures on HBAI for 2007-08, from which the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) has frequently quoted. Table 4 on page 66 shows that the chance of being in poverty is 36 per cent. for a child of lone parents and 18 per cent. for a child of a couple—half that rate. Those are the Government's own figures from a central DWP document on child poverty.

Mr. Stuart: One would hope that in a less febrile battle between false political narratives one would not even need to see the tables; one needs only common sense to see that that is likely to happen. No one wants to stigmatise single parents or to pretend that anyone lives in a model family, least of all today, but one must recognise the realities and try to support people in staying together and to minimise what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said were the supply routes into poverty. That should be a common cause across the House. It is a shame that we have to read out tables to get people to do what common sense should tell them as a matter of course. That is a key appeal from me.

When debating new clauses 3 and 2, we need to talk about the causes of poverty. That is a complex area, and we need cross-party working and understanding without playing games. On Second Reading, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that the Bill would hold the Government of the day's feet to the fire to ensure that aims on child poverty were delivered. My duty—not in 2018 or 2090, but right now, as a Member of Parliament who represents many poor families and poor children—is to try to hold this Government to the fire for solemn pledges that they have made, but they do not even want to make a report to the House to 'fess up to what is happening. The failure to do that and to agree this new clause suggests that we will not be doing everything we can to minimise the number of children in child poverty, not in 10 or 12 years' time, but right now in the coming months.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I now have to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day. On the motion relating to environmental protection, the Ayes were 284 and the Noes were 192, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is always a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart). I note that during his speech he was in his new charitable guise. Despite that, I am grateful for having been called to speak after him. It is rather better that I should follow him than the other way around.

In Committee, I thought that we were getting very close to a university lecture in semantics at times. We learned that eradication meant no such thing, certainly in terms of how the general public would understand it. Similarly, I think that we are in danger of looking at child poverty through the eyes of the House alone and not those of people outside, and of seeing it purely in statistical terms rather than in the wider terms that people outside would see it. Looking at it through those eyes, I do not see how we can achieve the general aim of eradicating child poverty in that broader sense simply through clauses 2 to 5, so I rise to speak in support of new clause 2 and the consequential amendments that deal with the causes of child poverty. We cannot deal with child poverty adequately without considering its causes and how we might break the cycle of deprivation. I agree that income has to be a substantial part of that, but I want to talk about why considering income alone would be inadequate.

In the period between Committee and Report, I have had the privilege of being able to talk to a number of organisations that work to combat child poverty. I have spoken to them in some depth about the Bill and their approach to child poverty in general. One of the things that they welcome is that the Bill sets a framework. They are not necessarily in agreement that it is the right framework, but they agree that there should be a framework. One of the consistent things that has come out of my conversations with them is that they too see the difficulty with a framework that is built only on income targets without taking into account the importance of the family and the broader context that others have spoken about today.

In Committee, the Government tried to argue that the broader context would be dealt with through the mechanisms in clause 8. I shall return to that in a moment but, if that is true and the Bill contains a recognition of that context—through the mechanism of material deprivation, for example—one has to ask why there is no consistency. Why is the recognition of the broader context in one part of the Bill not reflected in the targets at the beginning of the Bill? New clause 2 would rectify that problem.

I still have a great problem: I struggle to see how part 1 and part 2 are linked. It is perfectly right to have local government involved in delivering much of the work needed to help to eradicate child poverty, but that work is about the causes of the poverty and the cycle of deprivation. We heard from, among others, Paul Carter, the leader of Kent county council. He told us how that council was pulling the work together, and not just in recent years: it had been a long journey lasting six, seven or eight years, which had included integrating the work with the delivery of education.

The county council that covers my constituency has taken the same joined-up approach involving education and the primary care trust, with the aim of looking at the causes of child poverty and helping to overcome it. It is a shame that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) is not in his seat at the moment, as that approach goes part of the way to answering the concerns that he raised about how we get to the root causes of child poverty.

In some ways, the Government have recognised that one way to get to those root causes is to use local government. That is what part 2 of the Bill is about, but the Government have not linked part 2 with the targets in part 1 to achieve the sort of broad target that new clause 2 calls for.

We also heard evidence from Charlotte Pickles from the Centre for Social Justice about the need to see things in a family context. She made the point that we need to

make sure that the increases in money provided to try to eradicate poverty reach the child, and that it is not unfairly diverted to other causes in any of the various possible ways. I was struck by her comment in her evidence of 22 October, when she said:

"of course, you need to address income levels but that cannot be the sole thing. Unfortunately, the Bill is framed in such a way that we feel that the point of looking at a wider perspective may be lost."—[*Official Report, Child Poverty Public Bill Committee*, 22 October 2009; c. 82-83, Q7.]

I think that that goes to the heart of new clause 2 and the consequential amendments that flow from it. We need to move towards that broader picture.

In Committee, I was astonished that the Minister seemed unable to make the connections between other factors and child poverty, or to see the problem in a way that was not compartmentalised but in the round. In response to question 13, Charlotte Pickles said:

"If your targets are solely focused on income, and not on other issues around poverty, you are not measuring what is necessarily going to bring that child out of poverty."—[*Official Report, Child Poverty Public Bill Committee*, 22 October 2009; c. 86, Q13.]

When taken with the broader context of the family, that child focus was extremely helpful.

However, we did not hear only from Charlotte Pickles and the Centre for Social Justice, as we also heard Neil O'Brien from the Policy Exchange talk about the narrowness of the targets in the Bill. There has been some talk to the effect that the current targets at least give focus. I admit that they do give a focus on income, but that is surely not enough: we have to make sure that the focus is complete, and that it is the right focus. I am far from convinced that that is the case, and it goes to the heart of the Bill's extremely poor structure.

4 pm

Mr. Jamie Reed: The hon. Gentleman has made some interesting points, but does he agree that income is the cornerstone of the Bill and that, frankly, everything else—whether health and well-being, the family unit or any of the other issues relating to opportunity—cannot be addressed unless we centralise our efforts first and foremost on income?

John Howell: I am not arguing that we should not take income into account. I have not heard anyone in the evidence sessions in Committee or in the House on Second Reading or today say that income is not an important element; but surely the hon. Gentleman cannot claim that income is everything. It cannot form the complete picture.

Mr. Reed: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I fear that I was not as clear as I might have been. I am not taking issue with him at all. I simply say that income is at the heart of everything that we do. The other issues that he talks of, which are exceptionally important, cannot be progressed in any way unless we first address the income issue.

John Howell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but I look at it the other way around. We need to ensure that the increase in income that we use to help to eradicate child poverty is well used and that no other factor will come into play to prevent it from having the maximum effect, but we cannot tell that at the moment, because we do not see in the Bill how to deal with the causes of deprivation and poverty—what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead referred to as stopping the flow of negativity that enters the system and produces the root causes of the problem.

I well recall the comment in Committee that the Bill already took such things into account with the emphasis on material deprivation and the need to consider them in the strategy, but what stuck in my mind most in reading the report of the Committee proceedings was the information that the data on assessing material deprivation were so weak. So why is an imperfect measure buried in the Bill, when new clause 2 could provide us with a much better measure of the things that material deprivation indicates we are struggling to move towards. We must not view the issue in terms of narrow statistics. I do not want too many targets in any Bill, but nor do I want targets that skew the Bill and our actions towards income only.

In Committee, if I remember correctly, the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) was sceptical and said that too many targets would allow the Government too much wriggle room. If there were 10 targets, they could say that they had achieved seven of them and therefore that they had met their goals, but those seven targets might not be the most important ones. I take that point—it is one of the things that needs to be worked out—but I do not believe that the process is impractical to achieve.

Those hon. Members who have been involved in the management of businesses may well have come across the concept of the balanced scorecard, by which the most important quadrants of a business's activities are divided and a handful of measures used to manage the business to achieve those objectives. Almost all those objectives are not single ones; they are baskets of objectives in which decisions are made about the importance of each in achieving the overall objective in each quadrant.

The methodology exists and is being used effectively in business and local government. In the days when I was a councillor, I happened to be responsible for introducing a balanced scorecard approach to my county council, and the management of the council's business improved almost overnight as a result, because of the clarity and decision making there had to be, not just in respect of headline-grabbing targets but in respect of targets all the way through. *[Interruption.]* I think the Minister is trying to intervene on me, is she not?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman) *indicated dissent.*

John Howell: Ah, the hon. Lady is just making faces in response to my comments. If she would like a lecture on the balanced scorecard and how to do targets, she could make an appointment afterwards. I am very happy to share with national Government the knowledge and expertise that I have gained from local government.

I am almost at the end of my contribution. The point has been made that it is practical to look at a way of approaching targets based on the causes of poverty, instead of just sticking to the narrow and somewhat misleading targets that have been set in the Bill.

Helen Goodman: I shall speak to new clauses 1, 2 and 3, and amendments 1 to 20, 23, 24, 33, and 34.

[Helen Goodman]

New clause 1, which the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) moved, would include in the Bill a target for relative low income measured after housing costs. The consequential amendments are amendments 1 to 20. The new clause would impose a new target that is additional, as he knows, to the relative low income before housing costs target in clause 2 and the other targets in clauses 3 to 5.

Whether poverty should be measured before or after housing costs and the impact of housing quality on children's outcomes were debated at some length in Committee. I emphasise that the Government recognise the importance of housing costs to families' disposable incomes and the impact of those costs on their living standards. That is why the Government have placed, and will continue to place, significant focus on the availability of affordable homes. For example, the latest investment of £290 million at the end of November, delivering almost 5,500 affordable homes throughout 149 local authority areas, brought total Government help for house building since June to £1.8 billion.

Mr. Graham Stuart: Will the Minister give way?

Helen Goodman: Not yet, if the hon. Gentleman would just be a little patient.

As we discussed in Committee, however, there is a number of reasons why the Government have chosen to use before-housing-costs measures of poverty in the Bill. First, measures of housing quality are currently included in the list of items that are used for the combined low income and material deprivation measure, so if a child is experiencing poor housing, that will be reflected in their material deprivation score. More importantly, families who cannot afford items because of their high costs, such as high housing costs, will be picked up in the material deprivation measure. For example, looking at poverty statistics by region, it is clear, using the combined measure, that London has a far higher average risk of poverty than the relative low income measure would suggest, highlighting the additional costs—particularly the high housing costs—of living in London.

Secondly, it is important to note—

Mr. Stuart: Will the Minister give way now?

Helen Goodman: No.

Secondly, it is important to note the drawbacks associated with an after-housing-costs measure. As the hon. Member for Northavon said, measuring income after housing costs can understate some individuals' relative standard of living because they pay more for better-quality accommodation. Conversely, income measures that do not deduct housing costs may overstate the living standards of people whose housing costs are high relative to the quality of their accommodation. Therefore, the relative low income indicator before housing costs, in conjunction with the combined low income and material deprivation indicator, ensures that we effectively capture the issue of affordability of housing. Given the drawbacks of the alternatives, we consider the material deprivation indicator to be a better way of capturing the impact of housing costs.

The hon. Gentleman asked why housing benefit should be included as income in the before-housing-costs measure of poverty. The obvious answer is that housing benefit is income, but I shall give him a fuller response than that. Households in receipt of housing benefit pay their housing costs using their total income, including housing benefit. Households that do not receive housing benefit need to pay their housing costs from their total income. Including housing benefit enables like-for-like comparison between the incomes that households have with which to pay housing costs and to meet their other needs. To deduct housing benefit from the income of those who receive it would be to underestimate the total income that they had with which to meet their housing costs and other needs.

Mr. Stuart: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Webb *rose—*

Helen Goodman: I give way to the hon. Member for Northavon.

Steve Webb: Can I ask the Minister a simple question? If I were to give her a fiver and take a fiver out of her purse, would she feel better off?

Helen Goodman: That is not a very difficult trick question, because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, housing benefit rates vary around the country to take account of the different costs of housing in different parts of the country.

The hon. Member for Northavon asked a slightly more tricky question when he gave the example of two pensioners living next door to each other, one of whom owned their house and one of whom was on housing benefit, with the latter appearing to be better off on a before-housing-costs basis. There are similar arguments against an after-housing-costs measure. Imagine two families on the same income and with the same number of children. One family decides to spend a lot of money on a house in a nice area, and the other decides to spend less on housing because they have other priorities. On an after-housing-costs measure, the first family are considered to be poorer. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman can see the logic of my case.

We discussed in Committee the fact that other European countries measure poverty before housing costs. We have stated our ambition to be among the best in Europe. The ability to make comparisons is vital because they allow us to benchmark our performance.

The new clause would not change the approach to measuring child poverty set out in the Bill; instead, it would add a further target to the Bill, which we do not consider necessary. As members of the Committee, including the hon. Gentleman, highlighted, further targets run the risk of creating a lack of focus. Having four comprehensive targets covering financial poverty is sufficient and enables us to capture the different facets of poverty. As noted, the combined low income and material deprivation indicator will ensure that those whose high housing costs impact on their living standards will be captured.

The new clause proposes a target level for the measure of less than 10 per cent. The level of less than 10 per cent. for the before-housing-costs relative low income

measure in clause 2 was selected on the basis that that is the lowest that has been achieved and maintained over time in other modern European economies. The vast majority of European countries publish poverty statistics using only a before-housing-costs measure of relative low income, so there are no comparative data to establish whether a target of 10 per cent. on an after-housing-costs measure is either realistic or in line with our ambition to be among the best in Europe.

Although the targets in the Bill should be ambitious and stretching, they should not be unrealistic. The present level of relative poverty after housing costs is 31 per cent., or 4 million children. Meeting the proposed target would require a reduction to fewer than 1.3 million. I would argue that it is unrealistic to envisage our achieving that in the next 10 years. We published the principles of our child poverty strategy in today's pre-Budget report, outlining five principles, including cost-effectiveness and affordability. That is key if we are to meet our objectives in a sustainable manner.

I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that in preparing a UK child poverty strategy, consideration must be given to any necessary measures required in respect of housing to support the tackling of child poverty, as set out in clause 8(5)(d). We are currently analysing the impact of housing on child poverty to inform the first child poverty strategy, and that analysis will determine the key principles for that policy area and, subsequently, appropriate monitoring arrangements.

Finally, we are committed to ensuring that the "Households Below Average Income" series continues to publish income figures after housing costs, so that it will always be possible to monitor child poverty trends on an after-housing-costs basis and to keep under review the impact of housing costs on families' living standards.

4.15 pm

Mr. Graham Stuart: The Minister may not have been passionate in her espousal of the importance of housing in tackling poverty, but she has at least acknowledged it, and I welcome the extra money that is coming to the East Riding of Yorkshire for additional affordable housing. Can she explain, however, why a Government supposedly committed to eradicating child poverty have built fewer houses in any year of their time in government than were built in any year of the previous Conservative Administration?

Helen Goodman: I have described this afternoon the investment that we are making, which is providing a record improvement in the decent homes standard. That is having a significant impact on people's standard of living.

New clause 2 and amendment 23, tabled by the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), suggest that regulations under the Bill should set targets on a potentially wide range of outcomes that can be said to be the causes of child poverty, and that the child poverty strategy should set out what progress needs to be made to address those causes in order to meet the targets in clauses 2 to 5. The causes of poverty drew comments from many Members in the debate, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who brought his usual compassionate and well informed perspective to bear.

My right hon. Friend began by congratulating the Government on their excellent record and the scale of their ambition to tackle child poverty, but he suggested that the Government's approach had been too mechanistic. I point out to him that we are not focusing simply on incomes, taxes and benefits but, as I think he acknowledged, we are also tackling worklessness and education issues. He suggested that benefits had been increased too much compared with income, so I hope that he will welcome the better-off credit that the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced earlier. It will ensure that everybody in full-time work is better off. I remind him also of the significant reductions in the marginal deduction rates that we have recently achieved.

In the discussion about the root causes of poverty, the hon. Members for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), for Upper Bann (David Simpson), for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) and for Henley (John Howell) mentioned family formation. It would not be particularly fruitful for me to detain the House on that matter for long, but I point out that it is extremely difficult to say precisely what is the correlation between family structure and poverty levels. I remind hon. Members of the experience in Denmark, which has the highest level of lone parenthood in western Europe but also comes out at the top of the UNICEF table on child well-being. The lesson that we can learn from that is that the structures and policies that we put in place are far more significant than particular matters of family formation. In any case, it is not clear that those matters are under the Government's control.

Of course it is important that any Government tackle the broad range of issues and policy areas related to poverty. Clause 8 requires the UK child poverty strategy to do precisely that, but that does not mean that targets on them should be set in the Bill, as that would risk diluting the clear focus on income poverty and material deprivation that is at its heart. Such issues were debated substantially in Committee, and I refer hon. Members to the arguments that were expressed. As we said then, income poverty and material deprivation must be at the heart of the Bill because of the evidence of the impact that they have on children's lives, both in their experiences now and their chances for the future. Income poverty has an impact on children's education, health and social lives, the relationships with and between their parents and their future life chances.

Andrew Selous: Does the Minister not agree that making progress on dealing with the causes of poverty is very likely to result in the Government achieving their income poverty targets? The two go together.

Helen Goodman: If the hon. Gentleman had been a little more patient, he would have heard me make a similar point.

Our strategy needs to be multi-faceted if we are to break into generational cycles of poverty, and so truly end child poverty. That multi-faceted approach is supported by the Bill. The UK strategy will need to meet both purposes set out in clause 8(2). As well as showing how the targets will be met, the strategy must meet the purpose of ensuring, as far as possible, that children in the UK do not experience socio-economic disadvantage. That second purpose ensures that the strategy will be broad in scope and that it will focus on a wide range of

[Helen Goodman]

policy areas, rather than relying on a narrow range of policies related simply to raising household income through financial support.

Moreover, clause 8(5) establishes that the strategy must consider what measures if any ought to be taken across a range of key policy areas. Those building blocks of the strategy have been determined on evidence that shows that those policy areas have the potential to make the biggest impact in tackling the causes and consequences of growing up in income poverty. It follows that amendment 24 is unnecessary, because the strategies will already need to set out the specific actions that need to be taken to meet the targets, and the annual reports will monitor delivery, tracking a wide range of indicators that may change over time, as determined by the needs of the strategy.

As well as being unnecessary, amendment 24 is unhelpful and problematic, because it seeks to require the strategy to define causal relationships that in reality are tenuous and difficult to establish. The strategies will review the evidence on the underlying causes of poverty, seeking to establish clear evidence of causal relationships where they exist, but the problem with amendment 24 is that in many cases it is not possible to establish evidence of clear causal relationships. In many cases, the evidence shows that there are strong associations or connections between growing up in relative poverty and material deprivation, and experiencing poor intermediate outcomes in a range of areas, including educational attainment, health and other aspects of well-being. It also shows that there are strong associations between those intermediate outcomes and the risk of experiencing poor final outcomes in adulthood, including the risk of experiencing poverty and material deprivation. However, the causal relationship goes both ways. Income poverty has both direct and indirect effects on other policy areas, including health and education. Defining the causes of poverty, as the amendments would require, is therefore not possible to achieve at present owing to gaps in the evidence base and limitations in the data available.

The development of the strategy will involve identifying those groups of children most at risk of being in poverty, including particularly vulnerable groups, and assessing what action needs to be taken to meet all the targets on income poverty and material deprivation. The indicators that should be tracked will change over time, as determined by the needs of the strategy, but our ultimate goal—the ending of child poverty—remains constant.

I shall now turn to new clause 3, which was tabled by the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire. I understand the need for transparency on progress towards the 2010 target. However, I shall explain why the new clause is unnecessary. Opposition Members have been full of doom and gloom about our prospects for 2010 and achieving those targets—the hon. Gentleman asked a number of questions about where we are and where we think we are going to be in the light of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcements.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government previously forecast that measures taken since 2008 would reduce child poverty by a further 500,000 in relative terms, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the number is 600,000. The measures that the Chancellor announced earlier today will produce a further reduction of at least 50,000. He announced an extension of free school meals entitlement to primary age children whose parents are on working tax credits, and an increase in child benefit of 1.5 per cent. in April 2010, which is well ahead of what it would be if we had stuck with the indexation in legislation. I contrast that with the freezing of child benefit under the previous Administration, which meant that by 1997 it was lower in real terms than when they took office in 1979.

Steve Webb: I understand that it has been revealed since the pre-Budget report—it was not apparent in the statement—that the 1.5 per cent. increase in child benefit is actually a draw-down of the following year's increase. The following year will have not a full inflation increase but inflation less 1.5 per cent.—a real-terms cut. Was the Minister aware of that?

Helen Goodman: I do not think that there will be a real-terms cut in the following year as the hon. Gentleman suggests. I will write to him on that point.

I turn now to the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). Amendment 33 would add a further regulation-making power to clause 6, enabling the Secretary of State to make regulations setting out the circumstances in which a child living in "communal accommodation" may be regarded as living in a qualifying household. That came out of the report by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member. I would like to make it very clear that our goal is to eradicate poverty for all children: the framework that the Bill establishes for achieving that goal—using national child poverty strategies and duties on local government—applies to all children in the UK.

To ensure accountability for and progress towards the goal, clauses 2 to 5 define targets for a range of poverty indicators. As I am sure hon. Members appreciate, those targets will be effective only if progress towards them is measurable. That is why they do not apply to children who are not covered by the surveys that we use to measure poverty. Targets for those children would not be measurable, and therefore would be an ineffective way to ensure that their experiences of poverty are tackled. The Bill therefore sets out that the targets apply only to children living in "qualifying households".

For many children living in communal establishments, the concept of household income is simply inapplicable. However, we have other policies to address the well-being of those children. For example, in residential care homes, minimum requirements include the provision of healthy meals, clothes and sufficient financial resources.

I am concerned to satisfy the hon. Gentleman's concerns, because these issues are especially important. The Joint Committee on Human Rights said that the targets discriminate against children not living in qualifying households. In fact, the targets do not discriminate, as only actions can discriminate. He is making a jump in logic and setting up a situation that assumes that the policy that flows from the targets will be discriminatory. That is a mistake and that is why, with the reassurance that the objectives apply to all children, I hope that he will not press his amendments. I hope that other hon. Members also will not press their amendments.

Steve Webb: It is good to see the House filling up for my views on the after housing costs measure of income.

We have had an unexpectedly full debate on this group of amendments and one of the key points that

the Minister made is that measuring income after housing costs has many flaws. That makes me wonder why her Department publishes so many statistics on that basis every year. It is presumably because they complement the before housing costs measures, because they tell us different things. Each measure has its relative advantages and disadvantages, and that is why the Department publishes both. To pick one for the purpose of legislation seems inconsistent to me.

The Minister said that we need international comparisons, and my amendment would not prevent those being included. She says that 10 per cent. is an arbitrary figure—obviously it would be the same for before housing costs—and that it is unobtainable. She seems to think that we will just have to live with 1.3 million children in poverty after housing costs. That is a very depressing prospect for the coming decade.

Mr. Frank Field: Will the hon. Gentleman address the Minister's example of two families in identical positions, one of whom decide to spend more of their disposable income on housing—perhaps living in a better area and because it has better schools, which will help the children exit poverty? Under his proposal, we could beat up the Government for the fact that parents, because they have behaved in their children's best interests, appear poor, whereas under the single definition, they would not be.

4.30 pm

Steve Webb: Indeed. That is why a single measure, either before or after housing costs, does not give the full picture. Were housing costs always about housing quality, I would take the right hon. Gentleman's point, but often they are only poorly related to housing quality. Measuring income before and after housing costs, therefore, gives us a fuller picture. The Minister did not respond to my example. She repeated it, but she did not explain why the before housing costs would not be inaccurate in my example. For different circumstances, the two measures would be more or less accurate, which is why we need both.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart), in an impassioned contribution, raised concerns about the number of children in very low—below 40 per cent.—income households. I raised concerns about the data, and having checked the official figures, I can say that the figures below 40 per cent. are not published on a regular basis, because of doubts about their validity, especially with regard to the self-employed. He asked fairly why the figures show what they do, but I am not convinced that they necessarily show anything more than just problems with the data. However, that is unclear, and clearly we need good data, so I take his point.

The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) were informed by his membership of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. He raised an issue that I had not thought of, and I do not think that the Minister's response will offer him the reassurance that he seeks. As the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said, we have part 1 and part 2. Part 1 children are those who find their way into surveys, and part 2 children are those about whom local authorities have to do something. Part 1 children are privileged in the Bill because they have their own targets and the child poverty commission and so on. That infrastructure does not support the sort of children about whom my hon. Friend was talking, so he raises a valid point. As the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason) said, separate targets for the groups in part 1 might be the only way forward. I do not think that they can be melded into the existing targets, so they might need targets of their own.

Dr. Harris: The Minister asked me whether I was happy, but then sat down before I could intervene. Does my hon. Friend agree that the matter will be looked at again in the House of Lords? The Minister's assertion that the Joint Committee said that targets discriminate is incorrect; we were careful to say that it was not the targets, but what might flow from them, that discriminates. The problem was not solved by her response.

Steve Webb: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am sure that their lordships will want to return to that issue.

In summary, it became apparent a few hours ago, during the pre-Budget statement, that the Government have given up on the 2010 target. Independent estimates suggest that £4 billion or £5 billion might have been needed to ensure that the 2010 target was met, but there was nothing of the sort in the pre-Budget statement. The Government have therefore run up the white flag on their target of halving child poverty. That is why new clause 3 and a report on the 2010 target would be valuable.

Our argument on new clause 1 is not that after housing costs are the only valid measure, but that they complement existing measures. I have heard nothing from the Minister that dissuades me from that view, so I seek to test the opinion of the House.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 69, Noes 290.

Division No. 19] **[4.33 pm**

AYES

Alexander, Danny	Hunter, Mark
Barrett, John	Jones, Lynne
Brake, Tom	Keetch, Mr. Paul
Breed, Mr. Colin	Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Brooke, Annette	Kramer, Susan
Burstow, Mr. Paul	Lamb, Norman
Cable, Dr. Vincent	Laws, Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory	Leech, Mr. John
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies	MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair	Mason, John
Corbyn, Jeremy	McCrea, Dr. William
Davey, Mr. Edward	Moore, Mr. Michael
Dodds, Mr. Nigel	Mulholland, Greg
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.	Öpik, Lembit
	Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Farron, Tim	Price, Adam
Featherstone, Lynne	Pugh, Dr. John
Foster, Mr. Don	Rennie, Willie
George, Andrew	Robertson, Angus
Gidley, Sandra	Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Goldsworthy, Julia	Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Hancock, Mr. Mike	Rogerson, Dan
Harris, Dr. Evan	Rowen, Paul
Harvey, Nick	Russell, Bob
Heath, Mr. David	Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Hermon, Lady	Short, rh Clare
Holmes, Paul	Simpson, David
Howarth, David	Spink, Bob
Hughes, Simon	Stunell, Andrew
Huhne, Chris	Swinson, Jo

Teather, Sarah
Webb, Steve
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Sammy
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
John Hemming and Mr. Andy Reed

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Oliner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin

Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Thornberry, Emily
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Lyn Brown and
Mr. John Heppell

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 2

THE REDUCTION IN THE CAUSES OF POVERTY TARGETS

'The Secretary of State shall make regulations setting out reduction in the causes of poverty targets.'.—*(Andrew Selous.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 206, Noes 289.

Division No. 20] **[4.47 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Hunter, Mark
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mitchell, Mr. Andrew
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Teather, Sarah
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Michael Fabricant and
Mr. Stephen Crabb

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Killoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
Mason, John
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Price, Adam
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, Angus
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thornberry, Emily
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Hywel

Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Wood, Mike
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Lyn Brown and
Mr. John Heppell

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 3

2010 TARGET

'(1) The Secretary of State must, before the end of the period of three months beginning with the day on which the Act is passed, publish and lay before Parliament a report setting out an assessment of progress made towards meeting the 2010 target.

(2) The 2010 target is that in the financial year beginning with 1 April 2010, fewer than 1.7 million children live in households that fall within the relevant income group as defined by section 2(2).'.—*(Andrew Selous.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 214, Noes 281.

Division No. 21] **[5.1 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Drew, Mr. David
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Hunter, Mark
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Jones, Lynne
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Mason, John
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mitchell, Mr. Andrew
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Teather, Sarah
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Crabb and
Bill Wiggin

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham

Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thornberry, Emily
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Wood, Mike
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Lyn Brown and
Mr. John Heppell

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 4

DUTY TO IMPLEMENT THE UK STRATEGY

'The Secretary of State shall take such steps are are in his reasonable opinion necessary to implement the UK strategy.'.—*(Dr. Evan Harris.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Dr. Evan Harris: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment 21.

Amendment 35, in clause 9, page 5, line 21, at end insert—

'(ba) must consult the Children's Commissioners for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland,'.

Amendment 27, page 5, line 22, leave out first 'or' and insert 'families and'.

Amendment 36, page 5, line 22, leave out first 'or' and insert 'and'.

Amendment 28, in clause 22, page 14, line 1, leave out first 'or' and insert 'families and'.

Dr. Harris: I shall be brief in speaking to this new clause on behalf of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which reported on the Bill on 10 November. There are two sets of Liberal Democrat amendments in this group, the first of which, new clause 4, proposes that the Secretary of State should have a duty to implement the strategy on child poverty reduction. The second set—amendments 35 and 36—is about consulting children and the representatives of children.

Let me deal with new clause 4 first. In our report, we identified that, unlike in what might be considered comparable statutory regimes set out in legislation such as the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, there is no statutory duty in the Bill to implement the strategy. We engaged in correspondence with the Government to ask why that was. We support in principle having statutory duties to implement, as Parliament wishes, access to economic and social rights. That makes sense, as far as we are concerned, and we find it disappointing that there is no such duty regarding the strategy.

5.15 pm

The Government offered three justifications for not including a duty to implement the strategy. The first was that a separate part of the Bill

"places a binding duty on the Secretary of State to meet the child poverty targets, which is 'the strongest possible incentive' for the Government and their partners to deliver a strategy that over time achieves the targets."

The second was that

"including a duty to implement the strategy risks tying the Government to measures which subsequent evidence or analysis shows to be ineffective or inappropriate."

The third was that

"the Bill makes provision for political and public accountability for not implementing the strategy, by requiring that the Secretary of State's annual reports to Parliament must state whether the strategy has been implemented in full, and, if not, the reasons for this."

We considered those justifications, and offered our opinion on them. We do not believe that any offer sufficient justification for not including the duty to implement the strategy. The first, which was that the child poverty targets work and that there is therefore no need for a duty, does not work, and we used the comparison of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995—that although many things are done to deliver the strategy, there was still a duty to deliver access for the disabled. For that reason, we believe that it does not seem sensible to make a distinction in this regard.

In respect of the second justification that the Government offered, we did not believe that requiring that duty to be implemented would cause inflexibility because, in other areas, a public authority is entitled to take account of subsequent evidence or analysis when implementing a strategy. It cannot ignore such things just because it has a duty to implement a strategy. We said:

"We note that in the Disability Discrimination Act a duty to implement coexists with a duty to prepare further accessibility strategies after the first one, and similarly in the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act there is both a duty to implement and a duty to assess progress and revise the strategy."

In respect of the Government's third justification for not implementing the strategy, we said that, while we welcomed the political accountability that is included in the Bill, we did not

"consider such political accountability to be mutually exclusive with legal accountability"

to implement provision. We therefore recommend to both Houses that the duty to implement the child poverty strategy be included, as we believe that that will

"enhance opportunities to hold the Secretary of State accountable for failure to make progress towards the targets between now and 2020."

Given the debate that we have had about the 2010 targets, it would be a sign of political confidence on the part of the Minister and the Government if they were to accept that they both should and could include the duty in the Bill.

On the other amendments in my name and that of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), in paragraph 1.57 of our report, we said:

"In our view the duties to consult children in the preparation of child poverty strategies are insufficiently precise, because they leave it to the discretion of the Secretary of State (or Scottish Ministers/Northern Ireland department) as to whether or not to consult children directly at all: they could choose to consult organisations working with or representing children instead. We recommend that the duty to consult be amended to give better effect to the right recognised in international human rights law to participate in the relevant decision-making process, by requiring consultation with both children and organisations working with or representing them, and by requiring consultation with the relevant Children's Commissioner."

Amendment 36 therefore proposes the word "and" be substituted for "or" when talking about children and the organisations that represent them. Amendment 35 proposes inserting a new subsection in clause 9 that would require consultation with the Children's Commissioners for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There does not seem to be any good reason not to require consultation with them, as they have been set up as experts in, and champions of, children's rights. Members of the Committee do not believe that that would create inflexibility with regard to the bodies that

the Government consult. The amendment does not say that "only" those groups be consulted, but just requires that they are consulted.

Given the political sensibilities about the appointment of the Children's Commissioner, it would show appropriate confidence by the Government to include a duty to consult that person, whom they have gone to such great lengths to appoint after creating the post in a welcome move.

Those are the bases for the new clause and amendments, and I hope that the House will support them.

Andrew Selous: I have looked carefully at new clause 4 and read the relevant comments in the Joint Committee's report on the Bill, and I am not enamoured of the new clause. It should be up to the Government to decide how to achieve their objectives. As the Minister said in Committee, the Bill includes clear targets. The Government will be held to account in the House, by way of the annual statement to Parliament, and I expect that occasion to be well attended and one on which the relevant Minister will be pressed very hard if sufficient progress has not been made. The press and media, the lobby groups that take an interest in these matters, the charities and many people in the voluntary sector will ensure a good amount of pressure and focus is put on targets.

It is a worrying development to bring judges into the Bill to the extent that new clause 4 would do, so I am afraid that I am not with the hon. Gentleman on the new clause. However, I am more inclined to support amendments 35 and 36. It is right that the Government should speak to children. I find it hard to conceive that local or central Government could have any set of policies or provide any service without speaking to the people for whom those services are provided or for whom those policies are designed to assist.

My hon. Friends the Members for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) and for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge) and I tabled amendments 27 and 28, which I think are superior to the hon. Gentleman's amendments, because they would require the Government to speak not only to children, as his amendment would, but to the families. I absolutely understand the focus on children and child poverty, but it would be strange to go to a poor family—the Government measure poverty by considering the poverty of parents or guardians as well as that of their children—and speak to the children but not to their parents. That would not be the right approach, and amendment 27 and 28 would remedy that omission.

Government amendment 21 will ensure that child care is included in the Bill. That very welcome concession is one of the few that the Government have made as a result of the debates in Committee, and it is good to know that all our labours were not wholly in vain in Committee.

It is worth noting in passing that under the Welfare Reform Act 2009, the Government sought to impose sanctions on lone parents when their children were only three years old and that the Conservative party made sure that the age was raised to five, when children go to school, as that is quite young enough to start imposing sanctions on parents. However, the point about child care is important. If we are to require lone parents—separated parents—to seek work when their children reach the age of 5, we must absolutely ensure that child care is in place. It has to be in place before school, on occasions, if there is a journey to work, after work, and, particularly importantly, in the holidays. Part-time and flexible work is incredibly important for that group of parents, many of whom seek to enter the labour market for the first time and are unable to make the step to full-time work, although they may aspire to it.

It is worth noting that there has not been universal success on child care as far as the Government are concerned. In fact, in 2008, more child care places closed down than were created. The child minder work force is in steep decline, and many private sector child care providers are having great difficulties. Although I welcome the inclusion of child care, I think that the Government need to address some significant issues to ensure that child care is adequate and that separated parents in particular can get into work.

Helen Goodman: I shall speak to new clause 4 and amendments 21, 27, 28, 35 and 36, which have been grouped because they all relate to UK strategies.

I shall respond to the points that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made on new clause 4, which seeks to impose a duty on the Secretary of State to implement the measures in a UK child poverty strategy. Like the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), I do not believe that the proposed change is necessary. The Bill sets four challenges, which, if met, would represent a considerable achievement. The legal duty to meet those targets is absolute, and it is supported by the duty in clause 8 to publish and lay before Parliament a strategy setting out the measures that the Secretary of State proposes to take to meet them.

The intention is clear: the strategy will drive forward action to achieve the targets. If there is a failure by the Government to take sufficient action, as detailed in the strategy, the targets will not be met and that may result in a judicial review. That clearly places very strong pressure on the Government to implement the measures set out in a strategy. There is a significant difference between this legislation and the legislation that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon noted. The Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 require the Government to implement strategies to achieve their goals, but they do not contain legally binding targets, unlike the Bill before us, which does contain such targets.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights stated that it is not incompatible to have both a duty to meet the targets and a duty to implement the strategy. I understand the theoretical point, but in practice there is no need for both duties. In fact, a duty to implement the strategy could be unhelpful and have unintended consequences that distract us from the important goals in the Bill. Such a duty risks binding the Government to take measures that may turn out to be less effective than was originally envisaged, or that could have negative outcomes that damage progress towards the target.

The Joint Committee is not convinced that the inclusion of a duty to implement the strategy necessarily results in inflexibility. However, surely the hon. Gentleman can see that the Government would be put in an extremely difficult position. If the Government did not take action to implement measures that, at that point in time, they

understood to be harmful or ineffective, they would be infringing the duty to implement the strategy; but, if the Government did take action in the circumstances, implementing the strategy could be argued to be an improper use of public money, because they would have implemented a strategy that had been discovered to be ineffective.

As a consequence, the Government would need to lay down a new strategy every time data emerged suggesting that a measure was not working. Apart from the impracticalities that would clearly result from that, the practical effect would be that attention would be diverted from the real object, which is bringing down child poverty. A far more sensible approach is contained in clause 8, which requires that the strategy must be revised and refreshed at least every three years, ensuring that new developments and evidence about the best way to tackle child poverty are constantly taken into account in the development of future strategies, which gives the flexibility that we will need.

5.30 pm

The Bill also demands accountability for action that the Government have and have not taken. If the most recent UK strategy has not been implemented in full, clause 13 requires that the annual report must describe the respect in which it has not been implemented and the reasons for this. Parliament will then hold the Government to account and determine whether they have acted appropriately. I therefore suggest that the amendment risks undermining Parliament's role in assessing the detail of how the Government take action.

Government amendment 21 seeks to make child care an explicit part of the child poverty strategy. This was raised by many hon. Members in Committee. There was a clear consensus that child care should be added to the Bill because of its great significance, not only in enabling parents to work but in improving educational outcomes for children.

Amendments 27, 28, 35 and 36 deal with consultation and are similar in effect. Amendment 36 would require the Secretary of State, in preparing the UK strategy required by clause 9, to consult children directly as well as organisations working with or representing them. Amendment 27 would have the same effect but in addition require the Secretary of State to consult families directly. Similarly, amendment 28 would require local authorities, when preparing their joint poverty strategies, to consult children and families directly, as well as organisations working with them.

Amendment 35 takes a slightly different approach. It would place an additional duty on the Secretary of State to consult the children's commissioners for the four nations. Very similar amendments were debated in Committee. As I said then, the Government's intention has always been that the child poverty strategy should be informed by the views of children and their families, particularly those with direct experience of poverty. Indeed, we are committed to ensuring that children's views underpin all our policies to improve outcomes for all children.

Amendments 27 and 28 include reference to families. Looking at this from a drafting perspective, it is not clear what that word means. Does it refer only to parents, or to others with parental responsibility? Would it include parents of grown-up children? The problem is that the word "families" can apply to such a wide variety of groups of people that in effect this would become an obligation to consult the general public at large. I am sure that that is not what the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire intends.

Andrew Selous: I understand what the hon. Lady says, but I remind her that in the Government's own Bills they often have to go back and tidy up some of the drafting, so I do not take that as a massive minus point on our part.

On the central point, does the hon. Lady agree that it is slightly strange to go into a household—let us call it that for a moment—to speak to the children without any reference to the people responsible for them, be they the guardian, both parents or one parent in the case of those living with a separated parent? If the intention is to speak to children, to which she says the Government are committed, it would be natural to speak to the families in which those children live as well.

Helen Goodman: Obviously one would not want to consult children without the permission of their parents. That would not be appropriate, but we do want to hear the views of children specifically. The JCHR made specific reference to article 12 of the UN convention on the rights of the child, and the attractive element of the amendments is the opportunity to give local authorities and the Secretary of State the chance to consult organisations and children.

Amendment 35 refers to the Children's Commissioners. Of course we recognise that they have particular expertise in this area, and they are exactly the sort of body that we had in mind in the reference in clause 9(4)(c) to

"organisations working with or representing children".

It is therefore not clear why the amendment suggests a specific reference to the Children's Commissioners, as it is unnecessary.

We are clear that the development of both national and local child poverty strategies should benefit from input by children, and I argue that the provisions in the Bill go a long way towards ensuring that their views are properly taken into account. We want the strategies developed under the Bill to be as effective as possible, and we recognise that one step towards achieving that is to ensure that they are informed by the views of those experiencing poverty. The challenge is more about how to put that into practice effectively than about the precise requirements set out in the Bill. I am concerned that amendment 35 would not actually help to ensure that the strategy more effectively reflected the views of children or their families.

I am sure that this is not what hon. Members intend, but it is possible that the amendments could become little more than a process requirement, imposing additional bureaucratic burdens that would not help us to understand the concerns of children and families experiencing poverty or make our strategy more effective. In other words, there is a balance to be struck. We do not want to place process burdens on the Secretary of State and local authorities, particularly at a time when we are all conscious of the need to be careful with public money. On the other hand, I appreciate the concerns expressed by hon. Members and organisations outside the House that the Bill does not spell out as clearly as it could our intention

[Helen Goodman]

to seek the views of children. Although I ask hon. Members not to press the amendments, we are prepared to consider whether amendment 36 would improve the Bill. If my colleague Lord McKenzie feels that it would be helpful, we will introduce it in the other place.

Ms Keeble: I am pleased to be able to speak at this stage, although I had hoped to be able to speak to the next group of amendments.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the processes in the Bill for consulting those experiencing poverty, and she said that the Government had brought forward their proposal to include child care in the Bill because of its particular role in tackling child poverty. In preparation for Report, I consulted in a community in my constituency where there is a high concentration of families with children living in poverty. I talked to people about their concerns, and a key one, which led to my tabling amendment 32, which is in the next group, was the overcrowding that they experience. I hoped that that would be mentioned in the Bill. I wish to make a couple of points about the consultation, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond to them.

When I went around the estate in Southfields, half the people I asked about their experience of poverty and the places in which they lived told me they were living in overcrowded conditions and that that was one of their prime difficulties. The feature of overcrowding that is the biggest problem to them—it is why I wanted overcrowding as well as child care, which Government amendment 21 proposes, in the Bill—is that people have to sleep in living rooms. That is a fact of material deprivation that I had hoped the Government would have taken on board and included among the indicators.

May I give an example to my hon. Friend the Minister? As she will know from Committee, right back in 1935, when there was a debate about poor families, children and housing in east London, a Labour MP said

"the right hon. Gentleman's standards as regards overcrowding are not"

normal. He continued:

"He contemplates as a normal thing that living rooms should be used as bedrooms. I can never agree to that...in ordinary circumstances".

He went on to say that if we accept that people should be required to sleep in living rooms,

"we shall be heading for the creation of new slums."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 1935; Vol. 302, c. 42-44.]

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend has persisted in making those points over the course of consideration of the Bill, and they are indeed extremely important. I can inform her that the Department for Work and Pensions intends to pilot a new question for inclusion in the family resources survey, asking families with children about the space they have available in their homes for leisure and family activities. I hope she regards that as significant progress on that front.

Ms Keeble: I am grateful for that, and perhaps my hon. Friend will spell that out more fully on Third Reading, so that we can be absolutely clear that families with children will be regarded as entitled to have a living space in which nobody has to sleep, so they can have space for recreation, family activities, doing homework, and all the other things the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) will regard as important in supporting family life. I look forward to speaking further on the matter if we reach the next group of amendments.

Mr. Graham Stuart: I rise to speak to amendment 27, which deals with consulting families. On page 5, the Bill states:

"In preparing a UK strategy, the Secretary of State...must consult...local authorities...Scottish Ministers...such children, or organisations working with or representing children, as the Secretary of State thinks fit...and such other persons."

Is it not odd not to mention families or the context in which children live? I would not make this allegation against the Government, but typically it is totalitarian states that try to bypass the context of the family and the parents to speak directly to children. The measure is rather odd. The Minister has tried to say that if we include families, suddenly the Secretary of State would be obliged to consult the whole of the general public, but that is obviously nonsense. The amendment would simply provide that the

"Secretary of State...must consult...such children",

families

"and organisations working with...children, as the Secretary of State thinks fit".

We have heard from the Minister, and we will not necessarily hear from her again, unless I have misunderstood the process, but it is a pity she dismissed the proposal. If the Secretary of State does not talk to children in the context of the family, she will not be properly talking to the child. The best advocate of the child is very often the parent. It is not that we do not want to hear directly from children, but if we do not understand the position of the parent as the chief advocate of the child, we misunderstand the essence of the important relationship between the state and children in the context of their family.

Mr. Streeter: Does my hon. Friend also think it a little peculiar and—I hesitate to say this—perhaps typical of a rather bureaucratically minded Government that they are prepared to consult

"organisations working with or representing children"

but not parents themselves?

Mr. Stuart: It is a little peculiar. I am trying to follow my hon. Friend in being charitable, and I do not want to be harsh toward the Government, but I am disappointed.

I would have liked to have heard from the Minister the context in which the consultation will take place. The cheapest and easiest way to consult children who might live in poverty might be to go to a school that serves a poor area and speak to the children there—in other words, entirely removed from the home and family in which the child is being brought up.

5.45 pm

I seek reassurance from the Minister, who said that the Government would like to consult children and families, because the Bill does not say that. The only substantive reason given for opposing this suggestion was that it would lead to consulting the whole general public, which is clearly nonsense. Why cannot the Minister

accept that talking to children in the context of the family, and talking to the family, is the right thing to do? She has her head bowed—I hope that it is in shame or embarrassment. It would have been useful to hear why she does not think that what we propose would be constructive and where she expects the consultation to take place. Will it be in schools or will it be in the context of the family home? How will it be delivered? I fear, as stated here, that effectively the family context will be excluded because of how the Bill has been phrased.

Dr. Evan Harris: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the points made about amendments 35 and 36. I am grateful for the support of the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), and I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) tabled similar amendments in Committee.

In response to the point about children's commissioners, the Minister did not give a good reason why they should not be included. They have been suggested specifically because their role is statutory and that is why they are different from the others. If we are to go to the trouble of creating through statute an organisation with expertise in being an advocate for children, it should be a statutory consultee. That is only logical, and I suspect that a similar amendment would attract widespread support in the other place for that reason.

The Minister was concerned that amendment 36 would create a burden of consultation—a process burden. If there is a process burden, and if consultation can rightly be described as a burden—I do not think that it can—it was created by signing the UN convention on the rights of the child. Article 12 is clear in requiring states to assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. The Minister made reference to article 12 herself.

Helen Goodman: Does not the hon. Gentleman think that there is a difference between involving a particular child in a decision that affects them insofar as they understand the issue, for which we have precedent in English law, and the consultation of whole groups of children? I am not suggesting that groups of children should not be consulted—that is a good idea. I simply do not think that the read-across from article 12 is as tight as he suggests, notwithstanding the general principle of children being enabled to participate where possible.

Dr. Harris: I see the point that the Minister makes. However, the explanatory notes on the duty

"to consult children, or organisations working with or representing children as the Secretary of State thinks fit"

refer to article 12. That implies that that consultation with groups is based on article 12, and that that is not restricted to the right of individual consultation on measures that the state imposes on a child. That may be a debate for another day.

I wish to record my thanks to the Minister for saying that she will look at this point. I do not want to be churlish, but it is a point about process. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon raised it on 29 October at columns 256-7 in a very good speech and in terms. At that point, she rejected the argument. The Joint Committee then issued its view on 10 November. The point of Report is for the Government to return to the House weeks later with a clear view, and not to see matters leave this House to be dealt with by the unelected House. I do not mean that in an angry way; I just regret that we are not using Report as it should be used. However, I recognise her willingness to reconsider the point, which ought to be put on the record.

Finally, on new clause 4, I accept that there is some validity in the Minister's point about whether it would tie the Government down to a duty to implement something that might not be the best way of meeting the obligatory targets. The Joint Committee considered and rejected that argument, but we will reflect on her comments and the Government's response. However, I reject the argument that a legal duty to implement a strategy undermines Parliament's ability to hold the Government to account. The processes of the House undermine that ability, and I think that any legal reference that Parliament can use will aid it. I do not accept that argument, and nor, I think, will the Joint Committee. It is clearly a difficult new clause, however, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 8

UK STRATEGIES

Amendment made: 21, in page 4, line 23, after 'education', insert ', childcare'. *—(Helen Goodman.)*

Clause 21

LOCAL CHILD POVERTY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): I beg to move amendment 29, in page 13, line 12, after 'assessment', insert 'including—

(i) job creation,

(ii) reducing family breakdown,

(iii) families with disabilities,

(iv) black and minority ethnic children, and

(v) looked after children.'.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: 32, page 13, line 12, at end add

'which must include the number of households within the area that fail to meet the bedroom standard'.

Amendment 30, page 14, line 38, leave out from 'of' to 'section' in line 39.

Mr. Gauke: The amendments relate to the duties of local authorities. Under clause 21, which deals with local child poverty needs assessments, the responsible local authorities are required to set out how they will address child poverty. Amendment 29 takes us back partly to an earlier debate, and in the time available I have no intention of running back through the arguments. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) eloquently stated, we believe that there is a lack of balance in the Bill, because it focuses on income targets, which we recognise are necessary, but does not contain enough about the causes of poverty and how we can address them.

[Mr. Gauke]

To some extent, amendment 29 is another attempt to address the causes of poverty. It would do so in the context of the local child poverty needs assessments. The Government can produce regulations setting out matters that must be considered in such an assessment, and amendment 29 sets out some areas that we think should be included in those regulations, two of which relate to the causes of poverty. In particular, the amendment refers to job creation, which could be a solution and also reduce family breakdown. However, we have had a lengthy debate on those matters, and I have no intention of running back through the arguments.

As I said, we have set out areas that we think should be satisfied by a local needs assessment. For example, it should deal with matters relating to black and minority ethnic children and families with disabilities. On several occasions in Committee we had an interesting debate about issues relating to families with disabilities and the treatment of disability living allowance for the purposes of evaluating a household's income. Furthermore, assessments should deal with matters relating to looked-after children, which we also debated at length in Committee.

Mr. Streeter: Does my hon. Friend agree that the process of having local authorities working with their partners, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector to thrash out local child poverty needs assessments using the headings that he has helpfully set out in amendment 29 would be extremely valuable in getting under the skin of what was happening for children in those localities and prove a valuable tool for those authorities and their partners thereafter?

Mr. Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, there is a recognition of some of those points in the Bill. We have debated such matters in the course of our proceedings on the Bill, but having those points in the Bill would be helpful and would give useful guidance to local authorities.

Given the time and the fact that the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) has already touched on her amendment 32, I will not go into it. However, I would like briefly to say that amendment 30 concerns a matter that we debated in Committee, thanks to a probing amendment from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). Amendment 30 relates to the definition of child poverty for the purposes of part 2, which relates to the duties of local authorities. Two issues came up regarding the relative income target in its application to local authorities.

The first issue was about how we measure relative income in a local authority. To be fair, the Minister provided a helpful note about national indicator 116, which stated that it would measure the proportion of children living in families in receipt of out-of-work benefits or working families whose income is below 60 per cent. of median income. That is not exactly the definition in clause 2, so if the Minister has an opportunity, I would be grateful if she could say how significant the difference is between that definition and the definition of relative poverty in clause 2. However, that definition looks pretty close, so to that extent our concern has been addressed.

A second concern is this: what things can local authorities do on the relative income target in clause 2 that are not relevant to those other income targets that clearly belong in the definition of child poverty for the purposes of part 2? The point was made in evidence to us that local authorities do not really have the levers to do anything about the target of 60 per cent. of median income. I can fully understand why that target exists nationally, but if local authorities cannot, as a matter of practice, do anything that is specifically targeted at that income measurement, why have it in the definition of child poverty for the purposes of part 2?

The Government accept that it is right that there should be a different definition of child poverty for part 2 from that for part 1; but if that is so, should we not tailor the definition more, and why should the relative income target be included anyway? We had a debate on that in Committee, but with the greatest of respect to the Minister, I am not sure that we received a clear answer from her. I hope that we will have an opportunity to hear one today, either now or on Third Reading.

Subject to those points, I hope that we will have an opportunity to vote on amendment 29, although I do not intend to push the House to a Division on amendment 30. However, it would be helpful if the Minister could at some point elucidate the Government's position on those matters.

Ms Keeble: I want to talk briefly to my amendment 32, which says that when local authorities make assessments of need, they should look specifically at the housing conditions in which children live, given the close link between child welfare and housing, as set out in Every Child Matters. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will address that point in her one-minute winding-up speech.

Helen Goodman: Rather a lot of points have been made, and I will have difficulty in responding to all of them. On amendment 32, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), I thought that I had made it clear that we were changing the information that would come in through the survey. It would therefore not be sensible to set a target along the lines that she has just described, because there simply is not the information available to do that.

In amendment 29, hon. Members are seeking to prescribe in the Bill matters that we believe would be more appropriately dealt with in regulations—

6 pm

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, 20 July).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E). That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 133, Noes 315.

Division No. 22] **[6 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam	Bacon, Mr. Richard
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter	Baldry, Tony
Amess, Mr. David	Baron, Mr. John
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael	Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James	Benyon, Mr. Richard
Atkinson, Mr. Peter	Beresford, Sir Paul

Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howell, John
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mundell, David
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robertson, Hugh
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, Mr. David
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Smith, Chloe
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bill Wiggin and
Mr. Stephen Crabb

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Danny
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brake, Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clegg, rh Mr. Nick
Clelland, Mr. David
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Davey, Mr. Edward
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Don
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrge, Andrew
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, rh Paul
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harris, Mr. Tom
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, Simon
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hunter, Mark
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw

Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Laws, Mr. David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Malliaber, Judy
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffett, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moore, Mr. Michael
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Price, Adam
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, Mr. Alan
Reid, rh John
Rennie, Willie
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Teather, Sarah
Thornberry, Emily
Thurso, John
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Trussell, Mr. Paul
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Stephen
Wills, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Wood, Mike
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Lyn Brown and
Mr. John Heppell

Question accordingly negatived.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Schedule 1

THE CHILD POVERTY COMMISSION

Amendment made: 22, page 18, line 20, at end insert—

'*Research*

9A (1) The Commission may at any time request the Secretary of State to carry out, or commission others to carry out, such research on behalf of the Commission for the purpose of the carrying out of the Commission's functions as the Commission may specify in the request.

(2) If the Secretary of State decides not to comply with the request, the Secretary of State must notify the Commission of the reasons for the decision.'.—*(Helen Goodman.)*

Third Reading

6.14 pm

Helen Goodman: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Tackling child poverty and deprivation is one of the most crucial roles for any Government. Our goal is—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members who are leaving the Chamber please do so as quickly and quietly as possible so that the Third Reading debate can take place?

Helen Goodman: Our goal is a society where no child's life is scarred by poverty, and where every child is given the best possible start in life and has the capabilities and opportunities to flourish. Children who grow up in poverty lack many of the experiences and opportunities that others take for granted, and can be exposed to severe hardship and social exclusion. Their childhood suffers as a result, which is unacceptable. In the current difficult economic times, our focus on tackling child poverty is even more important. Too often in the past, recessions and economic downturns have been allowed to affect the lives of children long after the country's economy has returned to growth.

Today, we set out the five principles that will guide our strategy on child poverty: first, that work is the most sustainable route out of poverty; secondly, that families and family life should be supported; thirdly, that early intervention is necessary to break cycles of deprivation; fourthly, that excellence in public service delivery is key; and fifthly, that cost-effectiveness and affordability are vital.

Worklessness in families and severe deprivation have not been tackled with the energy and drive needed to deal with entrenched disadvantage. In this context, it is right that we renew and strengthen our commitment to deliver on the 2020 goal through the Child Poverty Bill. The Bill will give us renewed impetus to deliver on our goals and to ensure that the right strategies and actions flow from it.

Mr. Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: I would like to make a little more progress.

The Bill will sustain and increase the momentum towards eradicating child poverty, create a clear definition of success, put in place a framework for accountability, and improve partnership-working and collaboration to tackle child poverty at the local level. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to the debates as the Bill made progress. It has been encouraging that it has received a warm welcome from colleagues.

I want to respond briefly to some of the points that were raised and on which hon. Members asked for the Government's view. The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) asked about the position of local authorities in respect of relative income. The objective is not to have separate relative income targets for each local authority area. There was some confusion about that in Committee, and I hope we have cleared it up. The hon. Gentleman also suggested that local authorities do not have any impact on relative income standards in their areas. We believe that they do have the ability to influence families' incomes, and, indeed, play a pivotal role in tackling the causes of relative low income. Also, local authorities will soon have the means to assess local progress in tackling low income, and it is entirely reasonable to expect that to be taken into account in the preparation of their needs assessments.

Local authorities have a number of levers at their disposal to help increase family income. In the short term, they can administer financial help for families on low incomes with measures such as housing and council tax benefit, encouraging families to take up financial support, and joining up national and local partners to provide personalised skills and employment support. Local authorities can also reduce low income in the future by driving economic regeneration and neighbourhood renewal, and by providing high-quality education and early years services.

Aside from its positive reception, the Bill has been a credit to the House. Hon. Members have spoken passionately and been extremely well informed on this crucial topic. The focus that the Government have placed on child poverty has ensured that both the moral and economic case for tackling it is indisputable. They have much to be proud of in their record on child poverty. Our efforts and successes in tackling poverty and deprivation across the country have shown that with the political will those problems can be addressed. However, we need to do more to tackle the root causes and consequences of poverty, so that all children have a good start in life, enjoying a fulfilling childhood and having the capabilities and opportunities to flourish. Our vision is of a fairer society: one in which no child is left behind and every child has the opportunity to flourish.

I have very much enjoyed the debate on this important Bill, not only today, but throughout its Committee stage. Delivering this legislation will take us closer to our goal of eradicating child poverty in this generation. This Bill will help to focus efforts across government, local authorities and other partners to improve the lives of children and young people, and I commend it to the House.

6.20 pm

Andrew Selous: I have no hesitation in joining the Minister in saying that eradicating child poverty is an ambitious but vital objective for our country. It is both an economic imperative, because no advanced economy can afford to waste the potential of so many of its citizens, and, as she has said, a moral imperative, as no decent society should allow so many children to remain in poverty, as has been the case in the United Kingdom in recent years. I shall repeat what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) said on Second Reading, because we are both proud to serve under a leader who has said:

"I want me—and the government I aspire to lead—to be judged on how we tackle poverty in office. Because poverty is not acceptable in our country today."

I am also pleased that it was a Conservative Mayor of London who decided to pay a living wage to Greater London authority staff. That had not happened before.

The long title of the Bill refers to "eradication", but both the Minister and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions have made frequent reference during our debates to the fact that the Government's real aspiration is to achieve a child poverty level that is among the best in Europe. It would have been slightly more honest to have said that in the Bill, because the 10 per cent. that is in the Bill represents the best level, and 10 per cent. is not eradication. Some 23 per cent. of children in the United Kingdom live in poverty, which is about twice the level found in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark—they have child poverty rates of 14, 12 and 10 per cent. respectively. It is also instructive to note that 23 per cent. of UK children were living in relative poverty in 1987, 24 per cent. were doing so in 1996 and 23 per cent. were doing so in 2001. The level of child poverty has remained stubbornly high for more than 30 years.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has drawn attention to the need for us to change our strategy if we are to make better progress, saying that

"the strategy against poverty and social exclusion pursued since the late 1990s is now largely exhausted."

The former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), has said that

"poverty has become more entrenched".

That is why we need fresh thinking on this subject, and I was pleased that just now the Minister outlined five themes. A number of those relate to the causes of poverty, to which Conservative Members have tried on every occasion to include reference in the Bill.

The Bill is very much a blank canvas. It sets out the targets to be achieved in 2020, but I was disappointed just now that Labour Members voted against including the 2010 target, even though I believe that some of the Minister's colleagues joined us in the Division Lobby. As I said, the Government have had 10 years to have a run at the target of halving child poverty, and I think

[Andrew Selous]

that a formal report to Parliament on that would have been useful and would have provided the Government with an early opportunity to come to the House to explain how the child poverty strategy will change.

Conservative Members have set out on a number of occasions the causes of poverty that we want examined. Our non-exhaustive list includes educational failure, hence our school reforms and our commitment to pay a pupil premium to those schools in the most disadvantaged areas, and the level of skills, which is vital. Level 3 skills, which were mentioned at Prime Minister's questions, are particularly important and have decreased over the past decade.

Both benefit dependency and intergenerational worklessness are huge problems that cause poverty up and down our country, hence the Opposition have produced some of the most detailed welfare reform proposals that any party has introduced in opposition or in government. Our "Get Britain Working" programme cuts right to the heart of what is needed to deal with child poverty, so that we can help people to get back into the work force and break these intergenerational cycles of worklessness.

Work on dealing with benefit dependency is extremely important, too, and I commend the "Dynamic Benefits" report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) in that regard. The issue of debt is extremely serious. We touched on that in Committee. It aggravates poverty for some families in a particularly nasty and unattractive way, trapping them in deep poverty, often for long periods. Some excellent work is being done in the voluntary sector by Christians Against Poverty centres and others up and down the country.

I was pleased to hear the Minister refer to the need to strengthen families, and I was particularly pleased to have support from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) in that regard, too.

We touched on the issue of addiction. I say again that I think that that needs to be part of the Government's anti-poverty strategy. I recognise that some people might get into illegal substance abuse and alcohol abuse because of poverty, but the relationship also works the other way around. Families and lives that were proceeding along absolutely fine are destroyed because of alcoholism or illegal drug use.

We have also learned from a recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the Government's child poverty strategy started to run into trouble as early as 2004-05. That was a key turning point well before the recession when poverty, unemployment and property repossessions all started to rise. Indeed, only a day or so ago there was an further excellent report by the Young Foundation pointing out some of these difficulties and to the important psycho-social problems faced by many families up and down the country. In particular, it pointed out the vital role of the voluntary sector, working alongside the Government to make real progress in dealing with these deep-seated issues.

In conclusion, I want to thank all those who were on the Committee, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke). He was an excellent shadow Minister to work alongside. I want to pay particular tribute, too, to my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart). They were a formidable duo behind us both in Committee and this afternoon. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), who spoke eloquently on Second Reading and made a number of excellent interventions today.

The Bill is not perfect. We will seek in the other place to push some of the issues that we have raised. However, we join the Minister in agreeing with her wish to see child poverty come tumbling down in this country. It is still far too high and we believe that we can make much better progress.

6.28 pm

Steve Webb: It was interesting that when the Minister began her speech she said that she thought that it was wrong that any child should suffer poverty and deprivation. She was, of course, right. The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said that the Bill talked about eradication, and it is regrettable in a sense—one might call it the poverty of our ambition—that we would regard success as 1 million children still living in poverty in 10 years' time. It might be that in modern industrialised societies that is, in the Government's view, the best that can be achieved. Clearly, it would be an awful lot better than the point from which we are starting. To that extent, we welcome the Bill. It is sad that the Government have felt it necessary to oversell it: the Prime Minister routinely at Prime Minister's questions refers to the Government's goal in legislation as being eradication, but he never qualifies that with the odd million who will still be left. That is really rather unhelpful.

It is true that the Bill raises the political price of failing to tackle child poverty, but no Government can bind their successor. The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) asked what would happen if we were at war in 2018. If that happened, no doubt we would repeal or amend the Act because we would have to spend money because we were at war. We realise that there are always get-outs to such things, but the Bill will make it more difficult, in a relatively normal period, for a Government not to prioritise tackling child poverty.

Mr. Graham Stuart: Does the hon. Gentleman have any misgivings about the Bill? Obviously, no one wants child poverty to be maintained, but if we do not make an assessment of a Government's overall social priorities, how can we come up with statutory targets for one particular area? Surely that creates a risk, outside of the calamity of major war, that we will prioritise child poverty when it would be better to prioritise something else because of the situation at that time. Is not the Bill more declaratory than proper in its structure?

Steve Webb: In a sense, the hon. Gentleman is clearly right—the Bill prioritises the tackling of child poverty, and he is perfectly entitled to take the view either that it should not be a priority or that we should not presume that it should be a priority. However, I refer him to the situation in the 1980s, when tackling child poverty was neither a priority nor a statutory priority.

Rather shockingly, the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire selectively started his history from 1987. He has done that before, but the first time he did so, I thought that it was done innocently; this time, I assume

that it was done deliberately. It is worth remembering that the Conservatives started government with 1.7 million children in poverty and that that number rose to 2.8 million under them, so, at the point at which he started his figures, the Tories had already put 1 million children into poverty. He then glossed over the fact that another 500,000 children moved into poverty before the Tories left office. They therefore doubled child poverty. I do not doubt the personal sincerity of the hon. Gentleman one jot, but the idea that the Conservative party is the answer to child poverty is amazing.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman and I had a similar exchange on Second Reading, so we are going over slightly old ground. I have the HBAI figures in front of me—I am sure that he, too, has them—and I see from table 4.1 on page 72 that the highest point was in 1995, at 29 per cent. However, my point is that these problems have been around for a considerable period. The rate in 1987 was the same as it is today. We have not made the progress that one would have hoped, despite the Government having made child poverty a political priority, because we are only back at the level that we were at in 1987, hence the need for fresh thinking.

Steve Webb: The House might have thought that the hon. Gentleman was making a slightly different point—that it has all been pretty flat for 20 years, and that this is all terribly difficult. In fact, he picked a point halfway up a hill—a hill for which the Conservative party was responsible—because the figures continued to rise after his starting point. The achievements of the Labour Government might not have gone far enough, but they peaked the figures at the top of the hill and started us back down it again, and we are now halfway back down the hill that he started halfway up. The situation has not been static; a long-term trend of grotesque inequality, which his party presided over with apparent equanimity, has been reversed.

Andrew Selous: I hate to take up too much of Third Reading on economic history, but will the hon. Gentleman cast his mind back to the economy that the Conservative party inherited in 1979? It was a shambles and the priority had to be economic growth and regeneration. We were the sick man of Europe and we inherited a shambles. It is not possible for every Government to make progress on both economic and social targets if they inherit an economy that is in total shambles. It is worth putting that on the record.

Steve Webb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. Clearly, 18 years is not long enough to avoid doubling child poverty. I assume, therefore, that he is saying that if the Conservatives came to office now, in what they say is a very difficult economic situation, and if child poverty were to double over the next 18 years, that would just be the way things are.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it seems eccentric to think that a Conservative policy could assist in dealing with child poverty, given that it might mean that a man who is on his third wife would still get extra benefits from their marriage allowance, while his first wife, who might still be looking after their children as a lone parent, would be being discriminated against and have an allowance taken away?

Steve Webb: The hon. Lady raises a point about the perversity of the proposal to reward marriage through the tax system. The Conservatives started the abolition of the married couples tax allowance, but she may recall that Labour finished it off. It is funny how things come around again.

However, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you would not want me to stray from the Bill, which I welcome. It does not do a huge amount, but it does raise the political cost of not taking child poverty seriously, and that has to be a good thing. It will also engage local government, and we valued the contributions that the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) made in Committee with his proactive thinking about child poverty at local level. That may well turn out to be one of the Bill's more concrete implications, as the national statistics will not be available locally anyway in quite that form.

As many hon. Members have said, we had a good Committee stage, and I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) for his support. It was also good that two Government amendments—on child care, and the research function of the child poverty commission—were tabled on Report in response to the points that we raised. It is a welcome—and for me a relatively novel experience—to find that the arguments that we made in Committee actually changed something. To that extent, it has been a productive process but I am sure, as the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire said, that our noble Friends in another place will still have some items left on their agenda. However, I certainly encourage my hon. Friends to support the Third Reading of the Bill tonight.

6.36 pm

John Howell: I do not know whether it is usual to have so many Back Benchers wanting to take part in a Third Reading debate, but it is perfectly appropriate for this Bill. In Committee, those on both Front Benches commented on the way that Back Benchers had contributed, and that included the amendments that we tabled. For myself, I have very much enjoyed participating in the proceedings on this Bill, as it is an extremely important subject that is very close to my heart. Child poverty is something that we really need to make progress on.

Having said that, I remain disappointed with many aspects of the Bill, given that this is such an important subject. I remain disappointed with the way that it is still ill thought through in terms of the targets that it sets and the way that it is tackling—or not tackling—the causes of poverty. We have heard a lot about both matters again this afternoon on Report.

I also think that the Bill's structure remains ill thought through, and I still find it difficult to reconcile what it is trying to achieve in part 1 with what it is trying to achieve in part 2. Another matter that was raised in Committee but not on Report is the possibility, as many of the charity representatives who came to the Committee as witnesses stated clearly, that the Government will be taken to judicial review over the non-achievement of targets. That is still the case, as is the potential, given that these are income targets, that judges rather than the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make economic policy—although, after today's pre-Budget report, perhaps judges could not do a worse job.

Mr. Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right to point to the absurd idea that judges might intervene in the complex area of child poverty—perhaps they will demand that billions be given in additional tax credits—but does he agree that there is also the equally absurd possibility of a conflict between statutory obligations? No Government before this one had ever put targets in statute, but now there will be statutes pointing in different directions. For example, whereas the Fiscal Responsibility Bill suggests that there must be cuts, other legislation such as the Climate Act 2008 and this Bill suggest that more should be spent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are discussing the Third Reading of the Child Poverty Bill and not the other legislation that the hon. Gentleman has referred to.

John Howell: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always good to take an intervention from the other half of the duo, who will no doubt make a contribution of his own in a moment. However, my hon. Friend is quite right to point out that that is also one of the legal consequences of the Bill, and I too think that it is an insult to Parliament as well.

I am also disappointed with the way that the Government continue to treat local government. It is clear from the Bill that they do not take local authorities seriously as entities in themselves, with their own agenda and ability to deliver, but regard them as the delivery arm of Whitehall.

Today is not the end of the matter with this Bill, as there is a huge pile of regulation and, even more worryingly, guidance to be issued to local authorities. All I shall ask of the Minister today is that she please take note of the evidence sessions and the comments made by witnesses. What is required from the Government when it comes to regulation and guidance is a light touch, if any touch at all. Many local authorities are already doing a good job in respect of child poverty, as was illustrated by the evidence to the Committee from Kent and Liverpool in particular. So please let us see in the guidance a recognition of the best practice that already exists.

I asked one of the witnesses what difference the Bill would make and whether it would make a big impact, because one of them had said that something pretty big needed to happen in the field of child poverty. I asked:

"Is that something going to happen as a result of the delivery mechanisms set out in the Bill?"

Neil O'Brien from Policy Exchange answered that negatively in terms of the delivery mechanisms and the aims in the Bill. It is interesting to read what he said next:

"you are not going to be voting in this place on the strategy and all of those things"—

the big picture things—

"you are voting on just a target that is very much focused on central Government and everything they are doing. So, in answer to your previous question, there is a complete mismatch." [*Official Report, Child Poverty Public Bill Committee*, 22 October 2009; c. 110, Q21.]

That is a great shame.

The Bill could have shown greater ambition and taken us a lot further down the road towards eradicating child poverty. Instead, we have had the perversion of the English language, whereby "eradication" no longer means eradication in the sense that the rest of us would use the word. I hope that, with a change of Government, we will get a strategy for child poverty that is much more focused on delivering real change for children and particularly the families in which they live.

6.41 pm

Mr. Graham Stuart: It is a pleasure to take part in the debate on Third Reading. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), I have enjoyed being involved in the proceedings on the Bill. The Committee that considered the Bill had the involvement of hon. Members from across the House. That is not always true. Government Back Benchers in particular sometimes seem to spend their entire time writing correspondence. That was not the case in this Committee, and every hon. Member took a deep interest in the issue and brought their own skills to it. Labour Members brought to the Committee casework and an understanding of housing needs in their constituencies. The Front Benchers of all three parties also played a full part in the Committee, which was productive, so it was a pleasure and a privilege to be part of it.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) mentioned in his address that he hoped the Bill would make it harder and put up the political price for any Government in future to fail to tackle child poverty. He then launched a rather partisan assault.

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): It was puerile.

Mr. Stuart: Puerile, was it? The hon. Member for Northavon then launched an assault on the Conservative Government, who did indeed inherit a basket-case economy in 1979.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are debating the Bill on Third Reading, and should therefore be debating the Bill's contents.

Mr. Stuart: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was trying to answer the points made from his Front Bench by the hon. Member for Northavon. I do not know whether his status is different from mine, but the likelihood of meeting the targets in the Bill is based on an assessment of prior performance. In 1997, when the last Conservative Government came in, we were in a similar position. Okay, the fiscal deficit at its peak in 1976, when the International Monetary Fund came in, was half what it is today, so we are in a worse position from which to make change. Under that Conservative Government, who restarted the British economy, child poverty increased in a way that is regrettable. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is nodding his head.

Despite the wreckage that is being left of our economy—again, by a Labour Government—if a Conservative Government are elected this coming May, we aim to ensure that we do not just revive the economy while leaving behind children in poverty. That is precisely why my hon. Friends are determined to take the child poverty issue seriously. We accept the fact that the record on child poverty was not great under the last Conservative Government. We aim to do better, but none of us progresses policy development in that area if we just try

to make cheap partisan remarks or to suggest that anyone at any time—Ministers in the 1980s any more than today—were indifferent to the welfare of children. They were trying to focus on turning the country around, from a sick of man of Europe and an economic basket case to a dynamo that could move forward. Of course, this Government inherited that position in 1997.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Could I remind the hon. Member that we are not repeating a Second Reading debate? I have given him some latitude, and I would now ask him to concentrate his remarks on the Third Reading of this particular Bill.

Mr. Stuart: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Stuart: I am grateful also to my hon. Friend, who intervenes conveniently.

Mr. Bone: My hon. Friend is making his point powerfully, as usual, but I have been sitting here listening to the debate and I must say that one way to reduce child poverty is surely to encourage marriage and for children to be born into families where the parents are married, because they stay together longer. It seems as though the two other main parties in the House are opposed to the idea of encouraging marriage.

Mr. Stuart: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. He was not here during the earlier debate, when I reminded the House of what the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is on the Front Bench today, told the Public Bill Committee. She said:

"The Government are not wholly convinced that family breakdown is a cause of poverty".—[*Official Report, Child Poverty Public Bill Committee,* 20 October 2009; c. 15, Q44.]

That is an extraordinary thing for a Minister in this Labour Government to say. They are turning themselves away from all the evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire intervened on me earlier to read out the latest set of statistics, provided by the Minister's own Department, which show that a child brought up in a single-parent family is twice as likely as a child in a two-parent family to be in poverty. So my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) is absolutely right.

We have a Government who, for their own narrow ideological or political dividing-lines reasons, insist on turning their face against a fundamental aspect of tackling poverty, which is to restore families and help couples—not necessarily married—to stay together to support their children. We know that if we can help to maintain that situation, general outcomes are much better. There is less likelihood of children being in poverty, and there is less likelihood of other unpleasant after-effects in later life, whether they involve mental health, educational outcomes or the likelihood of unemployment.

The essence of what comes out of the Bill will be the strategies that local authorities and the Secretary of State come up with, but it is most important that we tackle the causes of poverty. The Minister normally tries to be honest, and she talked about this piece of legislation—this Bill—ensuring that Governments have to be held to account and take action on child poverty. But, disappointingly, what did she do in her opening speech? Not once did she mention the 2010 target that this Government set, with a solemn promise that we would see child poverty halved. She did not even mention it, and we can only take politicians seriously on matters such as tackling poverty if they face up to their record to date. *[Interruption.]* I think the hon. Member for Northavon wants to intervene again.

There has been some progress, but the Government have not moved to tackle child poverty. Of course the irony is that, here we are, with this Child Poverty Bill and the Government congratulating themselves on introducing it, yet today, in the pre-Budget report, the door has finally been slammed in the faces of those who hoped—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind the hon. Member that there will no doubt be an opportunity to discuss the pre-Budget report, but that now it is the Third Reading of the Bill?

Mr. Stuart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is pre-Budget reports and future Budgets that will need to put in place the relevant measures, if child poverty and, indeed, the long-term roots of poverty are to be tackled.

Mr. Stewart Jackson: The Government talk a good game about the involvement of local government in the eradication of poverty, and they talk about initiatives such as Total Place, whereby they involve Departments across the piece in the support of local government. However, is it not true that the one Department that will not devolve power and responsibility for funding to Total Place and, I suggest, to the eradication of poverty is the centralised Department for Work and Pensions? The Treasury and other Departments support Total Place, but the Department for Work and Pensions fails to do so.

Mr. Stuart *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not going to be tempted to stray into a very different debate from the one that we are currently dealing with.

Mr. Stuart: I am extremely mindful of your strictures, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will return to the strategies.

We know very little about the strategies. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire tabled amendments to try to ensure that issues such as family breakdown and looked-after children would be covered in the Bill so that local authorities and, indeed, the Secretary of State dealt with them properly. It is in the strategies that we find the detail of whether we can come up with a way of genuinely tackling, let alone eradicating, child poverty.

Dr. McCrea: Can the hon. Gentleman assure the House that if we do have a Conservative Government in a matter of months, child poverty will be a key priority for that Government?

Mr. Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. In the light of what happened with child poverty under the last Conservative Government, I welcome the opportunity to say that it absolutely will be a priority. The leader of the Conservative party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), has said that the eradication of poverty is a major priority and that it is how a Conservative Government would wish to be measured. Statisticians of the talent

[Mr. Graham Stuart]

and skill of the hon. Member for Northavon will be able to remind my right hon. Friend, and indeed me, of that undertaking. We are pledged to tackle poverty, and we want to do so in the most joined-up way possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I understand that the hon. Gentleman is again responding to an intervention, but may I remind him that we are debating the Third Reading of this Bill, not any future Bill?

Mr. Stuart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Of course, it will be under the auspices of this Bill that any future Conservative Government would have to address child poverty—it will be the lens through which they look at it—so talking about what they would do is what the debate on this Bill is about. Unless it is repealed, it will determine and set a framework in which future Governments will have to deal with this important issue.

Mr. Bone: I have been listening to the debate with growing concern—I was here when my hon. Friend made his original speech—and I am beginning to wonder whether I should vote against the Bill. Could he summarise the reasons why I should or should not do so?

Mr. Stuart: If, like me, my hon. Friend does not like declaratory legislation, and does not think that targets should be set in law because they are a meaningless fraud on the British people, he may well not support the Bill. On the other hand, he may accept, as Conservative Front Benchers do, that this framework provides a driver whereby future Governments can show their intent to tackle child poverty. Given the difficulties with increases in child poverty in the past, it is tremendously important that we show the seriousness of intent of Conservative Members who wish and hope to be in government shortly; we must make absolutely clear our commitment to the eradication of child poverty. That is why, although I understand some of the questions about process that my hon. Friend no doubt has, I will not vote against the Bill. We need to show that there is consensus across the House that child poverty is wrong and we no longer want to see it. Through the details of the strategies that are produced in future, I hope and expect by a Conservative Secretary of State, we will be able to work away on the root causes of poverty and ensure that they are tackled.

I want briefly to mention an amendment dealing with rural poverty, which I tabled, unsuccessfully, in Committee. I appeal to Ministers, while we have them here, and before they go away to produce national strategies in addition to the local strategies produced by local authorities, to bear in mind the peculiarities of rural poverty. According to the Commission for Rural Communities, 22 per cent. of rural children and their families are in financial poverty. There are extra costs to living in rural areas. For example, households in rural settlements spend £74.50 on transport each week compared with £57.10 by those in urban areas. That is serious money coming out of income that might be thought to be in the hands of that family, making it better off than an urban family, but in fact they have to spend it on transport. I hope that Ministers will examine carefully the peculiarities of poverty in rural areas.

Like others, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) and the Centre for Social Justice on their work. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State is in her place, because I wish to say that one of the most exciting programmes that the next Conservative Government, if that is what we have, could undertake would be to follow on from the "Dynamic Benefits" report and consider the barriers preventing those who are currently living in poverty from escaping it and getting into work. We need to understand the incentives that affect those on low income with the same precision with which we seek to understand the incentives for the rich, where they may move and what tax they pay. We need to ensure that for people who are not in work, getting back into work pays and they do not find themselves worse off by trying to do the right thing. I do not know the detail of the measure that was announced in today's pre-Budget report, but if it is a response to that problem and intended to ensure that those who are not in work are definitely rewarded for getting into work, I will congratulate the Government on it. I hope that it is a reality and not just a pretence.

6.56 pm

John Mason: I thank the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) for leaving me approximately four minutes to make my comments.

We are agreed that we need to tackle income inequality. There has been much mention of the root causes of poverty, and we agree that we need to tackle them. I was not convinced by the Conservative argument that we should widen the Bill ever further to take everything into account, but income is clearly key. It is worth reminding ourselves of the explanatory notes to the Bill, some of which were extremely good. For example, they state:

"It is nearly impossible to quantify the financial benefits of eradicating child poverty. Growing up in poverty can damage cognitive, social and emotional development, which are all determinants of future outcomes for a child. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that child poverty costs at least £25 billion a year in Britain, and that £17 billion could accrue to the Exchequer if child poverty were eradicated. However, this is a possible under-estimate of the true benefit. There are other benefits associated with the eradication of child poverty which are difficult to quantify such as equity, reducing hardship, deprivation and exclusion and breaking the intergenerational poverty link."

I think we all agree on that.

The Child Poverty Action Group and others have said that we have to put serious extra resources into tackling child poverty. They have mentioned a figure of some £3 billion, and the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb), who has spoken ably today, mentioned a figure of £4 billion to £5 billion. That is the kind of sum that we would have needed from the Government if they were really serious. Without real money, I cannot see how child poverty targets can possibly be met. I know that we are not supposed to venture into the pre-Budget report, but it seems to have done very little to help.

There are other factors to consider, such as the fact that when people's work is cut to less than 16 hours, they lose tax credits, as well as the particular problem of single-parent families. In my constituency, there is a real problem of some kids being able to afford to go on a

school trip whereas others in the same class cannot. The main issue brought to me is housing problems, and I see many youngsters being brought up in seriously overcrowded accommodation.

I agree with those who have said that less than 10 per cent. of children in relative poverty is a pretty poor target to aim at. Is it ambitious enough? It is certainly not eradication.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is the major failing of the Bill? It has redefined the word "eradicate". Eradicating poverty means to wipe it out, and the target is not to wipe it out.

John Mason: Absolutely. It makes a complete joke of the word.

There are other concerns. The Committee discussed whether clause 15 will be a get-out clause for the Government in future. We clearly have to set priorities for the time we are living in. I might as well mention Trident again, because that seems to be more of a priority for the Government than eradicating child poverty. There is not time to talk about many other things, but I emphasise that the minimum wage is far too low. We need it to be a living wage, and there is some good work being done on that in London, Glasgow and elsewhere. I want the Government to be a bit stronger on that, because it would surely go a huge way towards eradicating child poverty.

Finally, I appeal to the Government to work with the Scottish authorities in taking these matters forward. Westminster clearly needs to take—

7 pm

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, 20 July).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E). That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business without Debate

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer relating to Corporation Tax.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

CORPORATION TAX

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order 118(6)),

That the draft Corporation Tax (Exclusion from Short-Term Loan Relationships) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 3 November, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Question agreed to.

REGIONAL SELECT COMMITTEE (LONDON)

Motion made,

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Andy Slaughter and Mr Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITIONS

Badman Report (Mid-Dorset and North Poole)

7.1 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My first petition tonight comes from home educators who are concerned about the Badman report. The signatures from my constituency reflect the general concern of home educators up and down the country. The petition states:

The Petition of persons resident in the Mid Dorset and North Poole parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000452]

Park Home Sales

7.3 pm

Annette Brooke: My second petition tonight has been organised by one of my constituents, Sonia McColl. It is about a problem involving park home owners, who are on the whole very vulnerable people, and unscrupulous park owners. The petition does not in any way suggest that park owners are all unscrupulous, but there are instances that many of us know about when we need to strike a better balance between the two groups of people.

The petition states:

The Petition of persons resident in the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole and others,

Declares that the Petitioners believe that unscrupulous park owners are able to force home owners to accept lower than market value prices for their property, by demanding interviews with prospective buyers and raising unreasonable objections to purchases.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to bring forward proposals to amend the Mobile Homes Act 1983, in order to create the following requirements: that a park owner should not have the right to demand an interview with a person buying a home; that where a park owner believes an interview is necessary, that interview should be held in the office and in the presence of a lawyer with a registered legal practice; that in such a case the lawyer must be satisfied that the reasons for the interview are reasonable, that statements made by the park owner are not fraudulent, and that the buyer's references are satisfactory; that the lawyer concerned must be acceptable to both parties and shall before the interview make himself aware of the contents of the Mobile Homes Act 1983 and other associated legislation; and that the park owner must meet the cost of the lawyer's services.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000453]

Badman Report (Harborough)

7.5 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I beg leave to present a petition from persons resident in my constituency in the county of Leicestershire.

The petition states:

The Petition of persons resident in the Harborough parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000470]

7.6 pm

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): Some time ago, I submitted a petition on behalf of thousands of constituents in support of the "Mahoro Must Stay" campaign. Unfortunately Adela Mahoro Mugabo is still under threat of deportation—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I understood that the hon. Gentleman's petition was on the Badman report.

Mr. Leech: That was last night, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that my information is that his petition is on the Badman report. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but would he be kind enough to see the Clerk at the Table to confirm that his petition has been endorsed by the Journal Office? I can then call him to present his petition.

Climate Change (Copenhagen Talks)

7.7 pm

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I present a petition that has been organised by Crediton Climate Action and has signatures from people in the town of Crediton, surrounding villages and many local organisations. Playing an especial part in this have been my constituents Gerald and Laura Conyngham, who are cycling to Copenhagen from Crediton to take part and make their views known.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Tiverton and Honiton in Devon and others, regarding the Climate Change Talks in Copenhagen in December 2009,

Declares that the following should result from the Copenhagen Talks: all countries should agree to take urgent action to reduce carbon dioxide (CO_2) levels in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million; developed countries should take the lead, given our major responsibility for past emissions; and developed countries should give financial help to the developing world to help them adapt to climate change and invest in renewable energies.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to do all it can at Copenhagen to achieve these goals.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000530]

Post Office (New England)

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The New England post office in Peterborough was closed in 2008. I wish to present the petition of 721 residents of Millfield, New England and other areas in the city of Peterborough.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Millfield and New England and others,

Declares that New England Post Office ought to be re-opened

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take all possible steps to ensure that New England Post Office can be re-opened.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000529]

Deepcut Army Barracks

7.8 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I wish to present two petitions this evening. The first is on behalf of my constituent, Mr. Gary Hobbs, who collected a petition of 200 signatures requesting an inquiry into the deaths at Deepcut barracks.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Sutton, Cheam, Worcester Park and others,

Declares that the findings of the Army Board of Inquiry into the deaths of Privates Geoff Gray and James Collinson at Deepcut Army Barracks have not closed the matter and leave questions unanswered and no one accountable for what happened.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons calls upon Her Majesty's Government to sanction a full, independent, public inquiry into the deaths of Deepcut Army Barracks between 1995 and 2002.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000626]

Freedom Pass

7.9 pm

Mr. Burstow: The second of the two petitions is presented on behalf of many thousands of my constituents who contacted my office over the past few weeks, when they learned about the threat now posed to the London freedom pass as a result of an announcement by the Department for Transport of a redistribution of funds from London to other parts of the country to underwrite the costs of their concessionary fare schemes.

The petition reads:

The Petition of residents of Sutton, Cheam, Worcester Park and others,

Declares that the decision of the Secretary of State for Transport to cut the financial support for concessionary travel for older and disabled people in London is unfair to the 1.2 million people who use the Freedom Pass. Further declares that London Councils currently contribute a third of the cost compared to the parts of the country where concessionary travel is fully funded by the Government and that the cut in the grant would result in London Councils covering half of the cost of the scheme.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons calls upon Her Majesty's Government to drop the plans to cut the funding for the Freedom Pass for elderly and disabled people.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000625]

Immigration (Adela Mahoro Mugabo)

7.10 pm

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): I shall try again. Some time ago, I submitted a petition on behalf of thousands of constituents in support of the "Mahoro Must Stay" campaign. Unfortunately, Adela Mahoro Mugabo remains under threat of deportation and I am now submitting a petition signed by a further 1,300 people who support the campaign.

The petition is as follows:

The Petition of the Mahoro Must Stay Campaign,

Declares that Adela Mahoro Mugabo, who is to be removed to Rwanda, is the widow of a man murdered in 2002 by the Interharamwe Hutus, and as a Hutu herself was accused by the Rwandan Military Intelligence of covering up for her husband's murderers. The Petitioners further declare that Mahoro was tortured and raped, and is now HIV-positive, and that if she is returned to Rwanda she will still be in danger and will be unable to get the anti-retroviral drugs she needs to survive.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Home Secretary to instruct a reconsideration of the Home Office decision and allow Adela Mahoro Mugabo to stay in the UK, a safe environment in which she will be able to lead a healthy life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000493]

Badman Report (Bristol West)

7.11 pm

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): I have a petition to present on behalf of 33 constituents in Bristol, West on the same subject as petitions presented by several other hon. Members: the report by Graham Badman into home educators. To avoid detaining colleagues further, I shall not read out the full text of the motion.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Bristol West parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000476]

Badman Report (Cheadle)

7.12 pm

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): I, too, beg the leave of the House to introduce on behalf of persons resident in the Cheadle constituency a petition expressing their grave concerns about the recommendations of the Badman report. The wording is exactly the same as the petition read out earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke).

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in Cheadle,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory

[Mark Hunter]

annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000612]

Badman Report (Brecon and Radnorshire)

7.13 pm

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): By leave of the House, I beg to lay a petition regarding the Badman report that has been signed by seven residents of Brecon and Radnorshire. The wording is very similar, or identical, to the petition presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke), therefore I shall not detain the House.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Brecon and Radnorshire parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000623]

Upper Gastrointestinal Surgery

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

7.14 pm

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is probably about two years ago that Devon primary care trust informed us, through their then chief executive, Dr. Kevin Snee, that it had been proposed that the upper gastrointestinal unit at Wonford hospital in Exeter be moved to and merge with the unit in Derriford hospital in Plymouth. In principle, I have no objections to proposals, including this one, that aim to create centres of excellence where surgeons can deal with a much wider range of patients and a much larger catchment area to improve their expertise in what is a very difficult area of surgery. Indeed, I support the call for centres of excellence.

In the discussions that I had with the then chief executive, it became clear to me that the facilities at Exeter would be moved to Plymouth and that, from that, the centre would grow. However, the upper GI unit at Wonford hospital in Exeter has developed as a national centre of excellence, using keyhole surgery to perform what are known as minimally invasive oesophagectomies—in other words, the removal of the oesophagus, a serious operation, usually required because of cancer, and one that surgeons need a great deal of experience to perform. To be able to carry out MIOs—which are much easier to say—it was promised that the excellence that had been developed in the centre at Exeter would be moved with the unit to Derriford hospital.

Under normal circumstances, the operation requires major open surgery, with the surgeon opening not only the chest cavity of the thorax, in order to access the oesophagus, but the abdomen. As one can imagine, that is a very large operation indeed. The surgical removal of the oesophagus has large implications for quality of life and recovery after surgery. However, as they have been developed over the years, it has been demonstrated and proven at Exeter that MIOs, where the thorax and the abdomen are entered using keyhole surgery, have a most beneficial effect on both post-operative recovery and quality of life, particularly where there are later reoccurrences of the carcinoma.

Since 2004, two surgeons at Exeter, Mr. Richard Berrisford and Mr. Saj Wajed, have done that operation in preference to open surgery. The Exeter MIO unit has submitted many papers to MIGOCS, the minimally invasive gastrooesophageal cancer study, which is run by the Oxford university medical school. The Exeter MIO unit is the only established UK unit that has published its data, published a safety algorithm and proven that its techniques result in the rapid restoration of quality of life, and it is also undertaking further research. Exeter is the UK's largest contributor to that national study, as a result of the work done in the MIO unit. Therefore, although I and my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire), who has raised the matter with Ministers in the past, have an interest in Devon and the wider west country, the unit is also of national importance, which is why I am raising the issue on the Floor of the House.

I was first alerted to the problems that have arisen with the removal of the MIO unit from Exeter to

Derriford only recently, by Hannah Foster, the Conservative prospective parliamentary candidate for Exeter, who was in touch with the local patients group. Patients, who included my constituents, were concerned that they would be denied MIO treatment and that the MIO surgeons, who were meant to have helped establish the MIO unit at Plymouth by last September following the move from Exeter, had not been able to do so.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour on achieving this debate. I raised the issue in Parliament more than two years ago and have continued to do so since. She referred to the move and the culture of secrecy surrounding it. Does she agree with my constituent Mr. David Hamilton of Sidmouth, who is currently undergoing treatment, and others who have raised the issue, who say that people are not allowed to talk to politicians? A culture of secrecy seems to have been created, with a rather sinister air of intimidation surrounding the entire proposal to relocate—a proposal that I do not believe adds anything to the argument, but which makes us in this place rather suspicious about the motives behind it all. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the proposal is not benefiting anybody?

Angela Browning: I do agree with my hon. Friend. There is already a unit in Plymouth, at Derriford hospital, and it might well claim that it does keyhole surgery. However, the procedure that it carries out is not the same as that carried out at Exeter. The procedure at Plymouth tends to be either keyhole surgery in the thorax with open surgery in the abdomen, or vice versa. In other words, it is hybrid in nature.

The fact that everyone had been informed that the move from Exeter to Plymouth would have taken place by September of this year—so that, under the supervision of the Exeter surgeons, the unit would ideally have been up and running in Plymouth by early 2010—is a matter of great concern. I shall turn in a moment to the subject that my hon. Friend has just raised. Patients are worried, and doctors do not know where they stand, and we face the potential loss of a groundbreaking unit, not only in the west country but in the rest of the country.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Browning: I promised the hon. Gentleman that I would allow him to intervene in this debate.

Andrew George: The hon. Lady is making some important points. May I first apologise to the Minister, because I might not be able to stay in the Chamber to hear his closing remarks? The hon. Lady has raised an important issue that also affects Cornwall. It involves the whole issue of planning for upper gastrointestinal cancer surgery. I entirely accept the view of the Devon and Cornwall peninsula cancer network that patient safety must be paramount in the planning of these services, but does she agree that, rather than taking decisions about sub-specialty surgical interventions for cancer in a piecemeal manner, as is the case at the moment, we need to take a broader, more strategic view of how all these interventions are managed across the whole peninsula?

Angela Browning: I am not sure that I have understood the hon. Gentleman correctly. I said earlier, however, that if I needed treatment for oesophageal cancer, I would want that operation to be done by a person who was doing many such operations, and I would be prepared to travel to do that. Patient safety is important, and some procedures, including this one, are of such a specialised nature that they should not be left to generalist surgeons, who do not see or treat enough patients who require such a procedure in the course of a year to develop sufficient expertise. So I might be disagreeing with the hon. Gentleman on that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, however, when he says that the way in which the primary care trust has gone about all this looks extremely sinister. The Exeter surgeons should have been in the Derriford unit by last September, as promised, and working as a team. Teamwork is important in building up the necessary expertise. We have seen examples in other parts of the country of units not making such a transition smoothly. The result is that the consultants do not have enough time to build up their expertise before starting to carry out these procedures. The consequences of that will be obvious to everyone.

Plymouth has not yet carried out a full MIO of the type done at Exeter. Nor has it yet filed any papers with the Oxford study that I mentioned, to which Exeter has contributed more than any other organisation in the country. It has not registered its patients on the national register database in Oxford. I therefore believe that, in the interests of patient safety, Derriford should not be expected to replicate what is being done at Exeter without the proper transitional arrangements in place which are seen to work. That has not happened yet, and I would be very concerned if such procedures were to take place without those transitional arrangements. The health scrutiny committee of Devon county council has referred the case to the Minister, because it is so worried about it.

A further concern is that patients who are now presenting to the surgeons in Exeter are being told that the unit will not offer them operations after the new year. I received a phone call earlier from one of my constituents who was told by phone only this morning—I do not know whether that was connected to our holding this debate—that an exception would be made, and that he would receive his surgery in the MIO unit in Exeter in February. That makes it sound as if it is a one-off case and it does not look as though it will solve the whole problem that I have brought before the House tonight. The Minister is involved and there should be some national intervention in this case, not least because of the research at the Exeter MIO unit.

The research is known as the LOGIC programme; I am sorry about all the acronyms. The laparoscopic gastric ischaemic conditioning trial is approved by the Devon and Torbay ethics committee, has been running since April and has so far recruited 15 patients. It requires a total of 44 to complete the study. If there is a break in the established MIO service, there will not be a sufficient number of patients to allow the research to be completed. It is a very important piece of research. It is so important that one of our local cancer charities based in Exeter, FORCE—Friends of the oncology and radiotherapy centre—has donated £20,000 to the research project. People locally have put their firm commitment behind the research.

Will the Minister confirm tonight that the MIO unit in Exeter will continue until such time that it is safely—and I mean safely—established in Plymouth? If not, why is

[Angela Browning]

this being done against the clear recommendations of the health scrutiny committee and contrary to what was promised personally to surgeons, patients and MPs by the primary care trust? Why has Plymouth failed to develop a total MIO, despite giving the reassurance that it would develop it in September 2009, by which time we would have hoped that it would be well on the way to being established?

Will patients in Devon now have to accept the choice of open surgery, which they do not want—those who have seen what is done at Exeter clearly opt for the minimally invasive surgery—or will they be faced with the very real risks of a learning curve in developing a new highly complex operation in a unit not familiar with this procedure? As I have mentioned, there have been disastrous parallels in previous examples of centralisation. I will not name them, but I am happy to tell the Minister privately where we have seen the procedure bomb as a result of the transition not being implemented properly and surgeons not having sufficient time or a team built around them to carry out the transition properly.

A final aspect of the problem is that people come from far and wide for the procedure in Exeter—not just from the south-west but from all parts of the country, because the procedure is unique. If the MIO unit closes in Exeter and is not reopened in Plymouth, a private patient could opt to have the MIO procedure and all the associated benefits if they are prepared to pay for it. NHS patients, however, who until now have had the choice and the benefits of the procedure, will be denied it. I really do not understand why something so groundbreaking and so important to our constituents, as well as being in the national interest, should be denied to the NHS. Something has gone seriously wrong with the way in which the process has been carried out, and I would like the Minister to investigate what it is and put it right.

7.28 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) on securing the debate.

The fast and effective treatment of cancer is one of the national health service's highest priorities. As a result of massive and sustained investment in the NHS and in cancer services by this Government, paying for more consultants, more nurses, more National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence-approved drugs and far better facilities, there are now almost 9,000 fewer deaths every year than there were before 1997.

In 2000, we published the NHS cancer plan, setting out how we would improve cancer treatment and ensure high-quality services for patients. The plan committed the NHS to implementing the latest authoritative guidance available on all aspects of NHS cancer care. However, I can assure the hon. Lady that decisions about exactly where and how care will be provided are local decisions. It is a matter for the local NHS, working with cancer networks, clinicians, patients and other stakeholders; it is not for Ministers to decide that in Whitehall.

The Department, supported by the national cancer action team, has been monitoring progress in the context of local plans. Although I understand the concern expressed by the hon. Lady, I am sure she will appreciate that if further improvements are to be made in cancer surgery and if better outcomes are to be delivered for patients, local clinicians must be able to secure local solutions to the various issues that are raised. In 2008-09, a total of 3,668 major oesophagogastric procedures took place in England. I understand that about 50 patients currently undergo surgery for oesophagogastric cancer each year at Derriford hospital in Plymouth, some of whom are from Cornwall. About 47 patients undergo surgery at Royal Devon and Exeter hospital in Exeter, and about 20 undergo surgery at Royal Cornwall hospital in Truro.

I understand that Devon primary care trust, working with the South West strategic health authority and the peninsula cancer network, has considered the improving outcomes guidance recommendations for upper gastrointestinal cancers, and that discussion took place with local people. The proposal is that from 1 January next year the oesophagogastric surgical unit at Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust will expand to become the centralised specialist surgical unit for patients from Devon and Cornwall with oesophageal and gastric cancer.

As part of its commitment to placing patients and the public at the centre of health services, the Government have established an independent scrutiny and review process for local change. I will deal with that shortly, and will deal in particular with the views of the overview and scrutiny committee, which were raised by the hon. Lady. The proposed change is intended to start from 1 January, which is fairly soon. The local NHS has finalised implementation plans, and patients in the south-west peninsula requiring specialist upper gastrointestinal cancer surgery will be given their surgical treatment in Plymouth from that date. The surgical element of their treatment will no longer be provided by Royal Cornwall hospital in Truro or by Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust. I recognise that there is a specific case of which I was not aware. I shall establish further information about it and report to the hon. Lady on whether it indicates any sort of precedent, because at present I simply do not know.

The peninsula cancer network has told my Department that the whole surgical team is experienced and properly trained in both open and minimally invasive techniques for oesophageal and gastric cancer surgery.

Angela Browning: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Lady allows me to say a little more, she may understand my point.

There is no nationally recognised definition of MIO, although this is a national issue. In Plymouth, the plan is to investigate both the role and the definition of minimally invasive techniques for oesophageal cancer as part of a multi-centre study.

Angela Browning *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Lady may still wish to respond, bearing that point in mind.

Angela Browning: I said I was aware that keyhole surgery had been performed at Plymouth. So far, however, a single case has not involved keyhole surgery throughout the procedure. Only hybrid operations have been performed

at Derriford. I believe that this is an urgent matter involving the safety of patients. If what the Minister is telling me is accurate, either those at Derriford are going to replicate what is done at Exeter—they have not done that to date, which that means that they would practise on the first few patients, and that would worry me—or they will drop the full MIO procedure.

Mr. O'Brien: I will make further inquiries about the hon. Lady's point. I will say, however, that the intention is for the internationally recognised research on MIO at Exeter to be supported and developed at Plymouth. Once the clinical service has been established, it is intended to support and pursue the research programme currently under way in Exeter and to develop further projects. It is also the case that, following the publication of the review carried out by Professor Mike Griffin and Mr. Bill Allum, a period of public engagement was carried out, with various local meetings.

I understand the concerns that have been raised, and we have looked into some of those raised by the Devon OSC. The PCN has confirmed that equipment to undertake open and minimally invasive procedures is in place in Plymouth. Additional equipment has been ordered, after discussion with a senior surgeon at the Royal Devon and Exeter, and it will be delivered shortly. This will not impact on the delivery of the service from 1 January.

Angela Browning: I hear what the Minister says about the equipment being ready at Derriford. However, if I wanted to climb Everest, I could order the equipment over the internet and have it all ready, but although I might be a bit of a mountaineer, that would not make me ready to climb Everest. Experience and practice are required to go with that kit, and an experienced team as well.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Lady puts her case very eloquently, but I have to say that the PCN has confirmed that the whole surgical team is experienced and properly trained in both open and minimally invasive techniques for oesophageal and gastric cancer surgery. As was described in the AUGIS—Association of Upper Gastrointestinal Surgeons of Great Britain—consensus statement of 2008, there will be two consultant surgeons operating on each case, which will allow for the incorporation of skills from around the peninsula and the appropriate supervision and mentorship model for minimally invasive surgery. As also described in the AUGIS consensus statement, there is no recognised definition of MIO, and these matters will need to be looked at.

I am concerned by what the hon. Lady says and I will make some further inquiries, but we have been given reassurances, and, essentially, this is a local matter. We therefore have to rely on local clinicians to say whether they can do this. At present, they are coming back to us, through the appropriate procedures they have, and saying, "Yes, we can do this." She is saying that she believes the qualifications and experience are not in place. I will look again, and we will go back to the local clinicians, but she says something different from what they are currently telling us. I am not an expert clinician, and no more is she, and neither of us knows whether those skills are in place. All she can do is report what is being said to her, and all I can do is report back what I am being told. This is, however, a matter to be resolved locally, rather than nationally.

That brings me on to the hon. Lady's point about the local health OSC. I am concerned about that, of course, because such committees can refer proposals to the Secretary of State for Health, which he can then pass on to the independent reconfiguration panel for consideration and independent advice. On 20 November 2009, the Devon OSC informed the Department of Health that it would refer the proposals to the Secretary of State. A letter from the committee providing the grounds for its referral was received by the Department on 4 December. However, I now understand from the local NHS that the committee has said it will be writing again to the Secretary of State, seeking to "clarify" its position on its original referral. We await that letter, to discover what the clarification is, and whether or not it is referring, and if so, what exactly it is referring. I initially thought the letter was clear, but it now appears that it is not and that it needs further clarification. As the hon. Lady will appreciate, it is not appropriate for me to comment in detail on the issue at this stage, and certainly not before the Secretary of State has had the opportunity to consider the additional letter from the OSC. I understand that the local NHS is continuing to ensure that there will be full implementation of upper GI surgery at Plymouth on 1 January. That is the current situation.

All patients affected by planned changes will be given support with transport and accommodation. As I stated earlier, the local organisation of health care services is dictated not by Ministers or civil servants in Whitehall, but by the local health care professionals on the ground. The criteria by which any changes should be introduced are that they are clinically-led, that they are focused on the best outcomes for patients and, of course, that they meet the highest levels of patient safety. I urge MPs who have concerns about the proposals coming from their local health service to contact their primary care trust. I understand from NHS Devon that the hon. Lady has not, as yet, been engaging with it and that it would appreciate it were she to do so. I also made inquiries as to whether Hannah Foster, a prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate who was quoted in the local media, had been in contact with NHS Devon. Sadly, she has apparently not raised issues with NHS Devon, other than by attending an engagement meeting. If she wants to do something that is to be taken seriously, engaging with NHS Devon would be an appropriate course for her to take, rather than just dealing with the media.

With local leadership and national guidelines based on the latest evidence, we are continuing to seek to ensure that cancer care is delivered in centres of excellence, which ensure that people get the best quality treatment. The hon. Lady has raised a number of concerns. I shall go back to NHS Devon to make inquiries about some of the points that she has raised and then write to her or meet her, if she wishes me to do so. I aim to ensure that in so far as she or I can be satisfied, given that neither of us are clinicians, such reassurances as can be given will be given. It is important that people know that they are receiving safe treatment at a centre of excellence and that such an important operation is being delivered at a place where they can rely on that excellence being delivered to them.

Question put and agreed to.

7.41 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 28 October, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 284, Noes 192.

Division No. 18]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Balls, rh Ed
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leppert, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Oliver, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Sailer, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark

Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Watts, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Bracher, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Alistair
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clegg, rh Mr. Nick
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. (Monmouth)
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Duddridge, James
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maples, Mr. John
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Mr. Richard
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Teather, Sarah
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 10 December 2009

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

LEEDS CITY COUNCIL BILL

Motion made, That the Bill, as amended, be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Thursday 7 January.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL BILL

Motion made, That the Bill, as amended, be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Thursday 7 January.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Nuclear Power Station (Bradwell)

1. **Mr. Bernard Jenkin** (North Essex) (Con): What representations he has received from English Nature on the environmental effects of proposals for a new nuclear power station at Bradwell, Essex. [305573]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): The Government requested and received comments from Natural England—formerly English Nature—on the appraisal of sustainability and habitats regulations assessment reports on the site at Bradwell, which was nominated in the Government's strategic siting assessment process.

Mr. Jenkin: I thank the Minister for his response but, even though I am an enthusiast for new nuclear power stations, may I draw his attention to the serious concern expressed to me, particularly by local fishermen and oystermen, that the volume of the outfall from a new power station is likely to be four times greater than that from the previous power station, thus causing serious continuing damage to the ecology of the Blackwater estuary? Can he assure me that that will be addressed, perhaps by ensuring that the intake and outfalls will be sufficiently far away?

Huw Irranca-Davies: The hon. Gentleman has been assiduous in representing the interests of local fishermen and people who are concerned about the impacts on the environment. I can confirm that Natural England's response suggested that there was insufficient evidence that a development at Bradwell could have no adverse impacts on the Natura 2000 sites and associated features. The Government took that on board during the assessment, and the conclusions in the habitats regulations assessment reflect that. Natural England has suggested that further assessment is needed, not least in relation to climate change and rising sea levels, of which he will be aware. I can assure him that I will keep a close eye on the matter, as will Natural England, to ensure that the pertinent factors he raises are taken into account.

Climate Change (Forestry)

2. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South) (Lab): When he expects to respond to the recent report of the Forestry Commission on forestry and climate change. [305574]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): The Government welcome the Read report, which sets out clearly how forestry in the UK can contribute to tackling climate change. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Forestry Commission are considering the report in detail and we will use its findings to develop our policy. We will outline next steps in DEFRA's climate change plan in the spring.

Mr. Cunningham: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to increase tree planting in this country by 40 per cent., given the climatic change problems facing us? What consultations will he engage in with various organisations before reaching a decision on the matter?

Hilary Benn: The Read report has only just been published. I spoke at an event for its launch, where many of the people who would express a view on the subject were present. I agree that we should seek to achieve the objective that my hon. Friend mentions, not least because the Read report points out that if we managed to achieve it, that would contribute a significant proportion of the reduction in CO_2 emissions that this nation needs to achieve by 2050.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): North Wiltshire and Wiltshire more widely boast some of the most ancient and natural woodlands anywhere in England, in Bradon forest, Savernake and elsewhere. However, large parts of our oak population are threatened by oak decline syndrome, and a number of similar pathogens threaten our ancient woodlands. What does the Secretary of State intend to do about that?

Hilary Benn: We have a research programme that is examining a number of the diseases that have emerged, including the one to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Their emergence may indeed be a consequence of climate change. We have a very big programme examining phytophthora and I was able to see some of that work in a visit to the south-west in August. I am happy to write to him to provide more information about the specific issue that he has raised.

Jessica Morden (Newport, East) (Lab): The report is very welcome. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Welsh Assembly Government about what Wales could contribute to increasing woodland cover to 16 per cent.?

Hilary Benn: I will certainly have discussions with all those who could contribute to ensuring that we achieve that objective. I should point out to the House that, in the 90 years since the establishment of the Forestry Commission, there has been a significant increase in forest and woodland cover in the country, after our having got to the point where we had chopped down almost all the trees that we had.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Forestry Commission report states that, in the next 10 years, the capacity of the UK's forests to absorb carbon could be reduced by up to 70 per cent. Will the Secretary of State therefore look to the capacity of Britain's uplands as a complementary source of carbon sequestration? Given that the average hill farm income last year was just £5,000, does he acknowledge that he must act quickly to restructure farm payments, to ensure that the upland stewards of our carbon sinks are fairly rewarded and are kept in business?

Hilary Benn: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have changed the system. We will introduce the uplands entry level scheme, which we consulted on widely and which was welcomed at the time. The truth is that those who farm and those who manage the land have a real opportunity here not only to contribute to sustainability and to the management of the landscape, but to reduce carbon emissions both through peat bogs—the national parks want to play a role in that—and by planting trees where we can to soak up carbon.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East) (Lab): I accept that the report is just out, but does my right hon. Friend agree that forestry has the potential to make a highly significant contribution to our emissions reduction targets? Indeed, with an increase of 4 per cent. in woodland cover over the next 40 years, we could, by the 2050s, achieve a reduction equivalent to 10 per cent. of greenhouse gas emissions.

Hilary Benn: I do indeed agree with my right hon. Friend. Trees are wonderful carbon-eating machines.

Carbon Footprint (Copenhagen Summit)

4. **Mr. Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What estimate he has made of the average carbon footprint generated by his Department's representatives in attending the Copenhagen climate change summit. [305576]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): I and three officials from DEFRA will attend the Copenhagen climate change summit, where we will push for an ambitious agreement on forests and the protection of our oceans. The CO_2 footprint of these flights will be 1.54 tonnes. We will offset that by buying certified emission reduction credits, as we do for all flights.

Mr. Bone: Trees are very good "carbon-eating machines". Does the Secretary of State agree with me that 202,500 trees will have to be planted just to cover the CO_2 emissions of the Copenhagen jamboree?

Hilary Benn: I do not regard the Copenhagen summit as a jamboree. I am sorry that some Opposition Members seem to think that there is not a problem with climate change. I suspect that that is an embarrassment to those on their Front Bench. Frankly, I cannot think of a more important meeting, because the consequence of failing to get an agreement would be very serious for our planet, for our climate and for biodiversity.

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Given the importance of getting a deal on carbon emissions at Copenhagen, DEFRA should be leading from the front. Eighteen months ago, the Government announced a new body, the centre of expertise in sustainable procurement—a quango within a quango—to assist, among other things, in cutting emissions from the Government's own estate. We now know that the Government estate will miss its 2010-11 carbon targets by some margin. Is the Secretary of State, who leads on sustainability issues in the Government, embarrassed by that fact, and if so, what is he going to do about it?

Hilary Benn: In 2007-08, across the Government office estate, we achieved a 6.3 per cent. reduction in CO_2 emissions. In the DEFRA office estate, we have already achieved the 2010-11 target of a 12.5 per cent. reduction against the 1999-2000 figures.

Roadside Litter

5. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress his Department has made on initiatives designed to reduce the amount of roadside litter. [305577]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris): This summer, DEFRA's grant-aided delivery partner, Keep Britain Tidy, carried out a major vehicle litter awareness campaign that resulted in a 25 per cent. reduction in litter in locations monitored by local authorities throughout England. DEFRA continues to work alongside the Highways Agency and local authorities in keeping the roads under their responsibility clear of litter.

David Taylor: The most recent local environmental quality survey states that litter on verges and landscaping alongside rural roads is now a significant problem. When does the Minister intend to introduce measures to give local authorities greater powers to fine registered vehicle keepers or other responsible people when litter is thrown from vehicles, especially fast-food detritus, which is particularly obnoxious?

Dan Norris: Those who litter from vehicles are subject to the same laws that apply to anybody else on the street. Although it can be difficult to identify an offender, especially in a vehicle moving at speed, 65 fixed penalty notices were issued during a recent vehicle litter campaign. The Government are examining the matter very closely and if a compelling case can be made, legislation might be forthcoming. We will certainly give that serious consideration.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): In the light of the fact that surveys done in my own city, Belfast, show that the people who are responsible for most littering are those who eat fast food, smokers, the 18-to-35 age group and those who chew gum, is there a need to target initiatives to reach people who are particularly culpable?

Dan Norris: The most important challenge is changing behaviour. DEFRA provides a grant funding of £25 million a year to Keep Britain Tidy, and about £1.2 million each year goes specifically towards behaviour-changing campaigns, which are clearly targeted, as appropriate. That has raised awareness of traffic litter, resulting in a 25 per cent. reduction in litter from vehicles.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): A significant amount of the litter on our streets, especially that thrown from cars, is cigarette material, particularly butts. What is the Department doing to get tough on the cigarette manufacturers? It is about time that they put something forward for clearing up the mess to which they contribute.

Dan Norris: Obviously, we have discussions with a wide range of people who manufacture items that contribute to litter. In truth, it comes back to behaviour change. Education, above all else, is what changes behaviour, and behaviour change is needed to deal with litter.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): There does not seem to be much evidence of behaviour change. Will the Minister applaud the work on that aspect of Bill Bryson and the Campaign to Protect Rural England? Roadside and pavement litter especially are made up of cigarette butts and chewing gum, but as there is little evidence of behaviour change, what more can the Government do? What is the take-up of the Minister's grants?

Dan Norris: There is keen take-up of the grants. A number of local authorities have taken up various offers of grants to work towards reducing litter. The Government have made important powers available to local authorities, if they wish to use them. When those powers are applied, they have a good record of working effectively.

Food Labelling

6. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on country of origin food labelling. [305578]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): This is a very popular question this morning. I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and the Food Standards Agency to ensure that we have tighter, clearer and more accurate origin labelling.

Andrew Selous: Tesco, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer and Waitrose are all backing our honest food campaign to stop imported food, which is often produced under lower welfare standards than our own, from being passed off as British food. Why cannot the Government do more to help British consumers and farmers in that regard?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The Government have been working on this for some time. We welcome the Opposition's honest food campaign—it would be churlish not to say that it is a good initiative. The Food Standards Agency issued new guidance in 2008. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), started a campaign in October last year with, I believe, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. We are working in Europe to try to ensure that food information regulations are as tight as possible, although they will not come in for perhaps another two or three years. We are supporting supermarkets that are labelling food more clearly, so that consumers can buy with greater confidence.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of us have been campaigning on this issue for many years? Will he help us on veal, especially? Veal is a very good thing to eat—the animals are incinerated if they are not eaten—but we must ensure that people eat English or British veal, rather than imported veal, which comes from animals that have much poorer lives than our own animals.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who points out that the Government have been working on this for some time. Veal is one of the products whose labelling ought to be clearer under regulations. I hope that he and the whole House are aware that the EU protected food celebration takes place this afternoon at New Covent Garden; we will be launching Cornish sardines as the 40th UK food to achieve that status. I hope that Opposition Front Benchers will join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and me at the celebration this afternoon, because those products are 40 of the best in Britain and are getting worldwide acclaim because of the protected name status, which we support vigorously.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Does the Minister accept that clear, honest food labelling is important not just for reasons of being straight with consumers, but because accurate information allows consumers to send a clear message to food producers about what they want to buy and what those producers should produce, which could allow his Department to reduce some of the burden of red tape and regulation on food producers?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We are encouraging retailers to mark and label countries of origin more clearly. I chaired the latest meeting of the pig meat taskforce earlier this week. We have reached a collective agreement—it ought to be finalised by 1 February—on pig meat, which has suffered because many foreign goods that are imported are claimed to be British bacon or British pork pies. I have no doubt that the agreement and new regulations will be launched on 1 February.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Following my Adjournment debate last week about the labelling of goods from Israeli settlements in the west bank, has the Minister finalised the voluntary guidance that is due to be published for British retailers?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I can advise my hon. Friend, who takes a great interest in the plight of the Palestinian people, as do many of us in the House, that my right

hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today laid a written ministerial statement before the House, announcing that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has issued guidance to retailers who wish to respond to consumer demand for greater clarity on the origins of produce from the Palestinian occupied territories. My hon. Friend will be able to obtain that guidance and download it from the DEFRA website.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I spoke yesterday to Peter Thornton, owner of the Cumberland and Westmorland Sausage Co., who like me is appalled that sausages can be processed in this country from imported meat and then labelled as British, even when the animals have been reared under conditions that would be illegal in this country. Does the Minister agree that one of the supermarkets ombudsman's powers should be to enforce both the honest labelling of food and humane animal welfare standards for imported food to match the excellent standards in British farming?

Jim Fitzpatrick: There is clearly a consensus in the House that country of origin labelling should be tighter. I think that the Liberal Democrat spokesman is trying to tease from me what the supermarkets ombudsman should or should not do when he knows that we have yet to announce the conclusions on the position of an ombudsman. That might very well be one area in which such an ombudsman, were one to come about, would take an interest.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): My hon. Friend should recognise not only the importance of country of origin labelling and welfare standards, but the importance of ensuring that when people purchase goods they know how many food miles they have travelled to reach this country, and the importance of recognising the quality of UK farming.

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. British farmers are spending more on higher welfare standards and they want to be supported in that by British retailers. We believe that the British consumer wants to support them and that we should ensure that country of origin labelling is clearer, so that British farming gets the support it deserves.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): When meat can be imported and then labelled as British, it misleads consumers and lets down our farmers. The Secretary of State says that he wants that practice stamped out. In January he said that he was pressing strongly in Europe, and in June he told this House that he was "pushing in Europe". The Minister has just repeated that the Government are working in Europe, so why in European Union negotiations this year did the Government oppose mandatory country of origin labelling?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I do not think that that is the case. The hon. Gentleman knows that competency in those matters rests with the European Union. The Italians have already been taken to task for trying to introduce a compulsory labelling system in Italy, and Ireland and Malta have already been told that that is not possible in their countries, either. We are negotiating in Europe to try to get the best deal possible, which, I have to say, is not the same position as that of the Opposition.

Nick Herbert: I have here the minutes of the European Council's working party on foodstuffs, dated 31 July. Let me tell the Minister what they record: the Italians, the French and nine other member states supported mandatory country of origin labelling; the UK opposed it. We knew that Ministers had failed to deliver honest labelling, but now we know that they actually argued against it. Is not it a disgrace that, for months, this Government have made cynical promises on food labelling which they have not had the slightest intention of keeping?

Jim Fitzpatrick: This is a complex issue, and the position that the hon. Gentleman describes is not that of the Government. We are doing all we can to get more accurate country of origin labelling, and we are working to ensure that the food information regulations, when they are introduced, are as tight as they possibly can be.

Canal Network

7. **Alun Michael** (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the contribution to the economy of the canal network. [305579]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): My Department is working with the Inland Waterways Advisory Council and the waterways authorities to establish and to quantify the wide range of goods and services delivered by inland waterways. That will build on work undertaken by my Department and IWAC to evaluate those benefits. British Waterways' research estimates that its canals alone deliver public benefits of some £500 million per annum and support more than 20,000 jobs in local economies throughout the country.

Alun Michael: I congratulate the Minister on winning the support of the Treasury for ways to maintain the integrity of our invaluable canal network and expand their capacity. Does he agree that, for the future, a third sector model—a sort of National Trust for the canals—would be the best way to harness public enthusiasm for the canals with environmental and economic benefit and the stability that has been achieved in recent years?

Huw Irranca-Davies: Indeed. I pay reciprocal tribute to my right hon. Friend and other hon. Friends who are so assiduous in keeping an eye on the future of British Waterways because of the wide benefits involved, and to the Treasury, which listened to the arguments and responded to them. The third sector model has featured in the Government's announcement, and British Waterways sees the potential for this alongside the exploitation of its property portfolio. It is a fascinating way forward designed to tap into the good will towards the waterways around the country, and I am sure that we will explore it further.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): The Minister will know from the reports that the Select Committee has done on our canal network of the importance of the property portfolio in contributing income to maintain the good progress that has been made on the historical infrastructure of the canal network. What assurances can he give me that that property portfolio will not in

any way be degraded under potential new arrangements and put at risk the income needed to maintain the historical infrastructure of our canal system?

Huw Irranca-Davies: The real turnaround in the waterways has been to do with the success of the exploitation of the property portfolio under the British Waterways model, and we acknowledge that the third sector model referred to by my right hon. Friend would indeed necessitate the use of that property portfolio. It is also to do with the record investment that this Government have put in, with £800 million in grants over the past decade alone. The current state of our waterways and their maintenance, improvement and restoration, is a tribute to the work of British Waterways but also, I have to say, to the importance that this Government have placed on them.

Marine Conservation Zones

8. **Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South) (Lab): When his Department plans to establish marine conservation zones; and if he will make a statement. [305581]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): The first marine conservation zones will be established on 12 January 2010, when the two existing marine nature reserves around Lundy and Skomer automatically become MCZs. Advice on potential sites from Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee is due by autumn 2011. The Secretary of State will then consult on and designate sites in 2012. MCZs, together with other types of sites, will form an ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas.

Ben Chapman: I welcome the creation of MCZs, with their rounded approach to conservation and the protection of marine life and wildlife. Can the Minister tell me whether the Dee estuary, which is already an important environmental site and a special area of conservation, will be a prime site to be designated?

Huw Irranca-Davies: I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the fact that, today, part of the Dee estuary—one of six sites of community importance in the UK—will be formally designated as a special area of conservation by the Secretary of State. I have written to other hon. Members who will have designations in their areas announced today. The Irish sea conservation zones regional project will consider the conservation potential of various parts of its area, including the River Dee. If there are parts of the Dee that have conservation potential—we already know from designations that there are—that are not already protected by other means, then they will indeed be considered.

Single Payment Scheme

9. **Mr. Roger Williams** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): How many penalties have been applied in respect of the 2008 single payment scheme; and if he will make a statement. [305582]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): Payment reductions have been made in respect of some 7,748 claims under the 2008 single payment scheme. That represents 7.3 per cent. of the claimant population of 106,500.

Mr. Williams: I thank the Minister for that response. The minimum penalty for non-compliance is now 3 per cent. of the total single farm payment for any farmer. One of the most common triggers for a penalty is failure to notify animal movements within three days. That three-day limit is imposed by DEFRA, yet the EU regulation allows up to seven days. Why is the UK gold-plating the European regulations to the disadvantage of our farmers? Why cannot DEFRA allow the EU norm of seven days for notification of animal movements?

Jim Fitzpatrick: As the hon. Gentleman indicates, penalties are imposed for a variety of different reasons. These rules are laid down primarily by EU legislation, and the Rural Payments Agency does not have real discretion in applying them. We have recently made some improvements to the scheme relating to the removal of set-aside and the 10-month rule, and we will obviously continue to do what we can to make the system as beneficial to British farmers as we can.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Ministers have announced that 80 per cent. of payments under the single payment scheme have been made to farmers, but given that we have estimated overpayments of more than £20 million and underpayments of more than £38 million in the scheme last year, what guarantees can the Minister give farmers that 2009 payments will be accurate?

Jim Fitzpatrick: It is a little churlish of the shadow Secretary of State not to welcome the once again improved performance of the Rural Payments Agency. It has been improving year on year, and this year it managed to pay out £1.3 billion, which is almost twice as much as last year, two weeks earlier than last year to four times as many farmers. From our point of view, that should be complimented and lauded.

Dairy Farmers

10. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): What estimate he has made of the change in the number of dairy farmers between (a) 2008 and 2009 and (b) 2009 and 2010. [305584]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): Although we do not have official figures on the number of dairy farmers, it is believed that the number of dairy farms in England fell by about 5 per cent. between 2008 and 2009. The source of that figure is the cattle tracing system. The trend in UK dairy production is towards fewer, larger herds.

Mr. Evans: The Minister will know that there has been a steep decline over the past 10 years. On Saturday, I was at the Gisburn auction marts to present some certificates to young farmers, who were enthusiastically showing their livestock. Clearly, however, enthusiasm will not be enough to secure the future viability of dairy farming in this country, so what sustainable future can he offer young entrants into dairy farming in the UK?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I think the hon. Gentleman knows that, notwithstanding the concern and anxiety of young farmers coming into the industry, the British dairy sector is fundamentally sound and is expected to do very well over the medium to long term, due to efficiency improvements, innovation and investment in new products. We are much better placed than most of our European competitors, and we will do all we can in Europe and the UK to ensure that we support the British dairy industry.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): I wonder whether I could confirm what the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said about dairy farming. My constituency is similar to his—not quite as beautiful, but almost—and for the past two years I have been the president of the Keighley and district agricultural show. I have been made painfully aware of the feelings of many farmers, and I am not sure whether the Minister is aware of how deep those feelings go. Not just they but their children are being forced out of the industry, because there is not a wage to be earned.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Obviously, I commend my hon. Friend for the position that she holds locally. Notwithstanding the reduction in the number of dairy farmers, the volume produced is not far short of where we were 10 years ago—13 billion litres rather than 14 billion—and we are well within quota. I reinforce the point that the UK dairy sector is much better placed than those elsewhere, and the recent trends in prices across the world demonstrate a keen rise in recent months. We want that to continue, because the dairy industry is very important to UK agriculture, making up 18 per cent. of the whole industry.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): A few weeks ago, the awful announcement of Corus closing on Teesside triggered an immediate and proper response and financial intervention from Government. The dairy industry is dying on its feet. The milk price today is lower than the production price, and that cannot be sustained. Will the ombudsman—ombudsperson in the Minister's language—have anything to do with milk prices when examining the supermarkets' actions?

Jim Fitzpatrick: Obviously, if an ombudsman is introduced, it will very much be up to him or her to determine which issues to consider most closely. Ultimately, we believe that markets determine prices. I reiterate that the UK dairy industry is in a much better position than most of our EU competitors. A high-level group has been set up by the European Agriculture Council to examine the problems of the dairy sector, which are not exclusively UK problems and are much more serious in other member states. It is examining the situation to see what assistance can be given to dairy across Europe.

Food Production (Research)

11. **Tony Lloyd** (Manchester, Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support research on food production methods. [305585]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): The Government invest £254 million a year in food and farming research in England and Wales, and £50 million through Department for International Development research overseas. That covers sustainable farming—reducing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to climate change and protecting against pests and diseases—and tackling food waste.

Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend mentioned climate change. Obviously, one of the enormous challenges to agricultural systems around the globe is the capacity of climate change to change agriculture totally. Are we satisfied that research in the UK will ensure security of food supply from our domestic producers, come what may with climate change?

Hilary Benn: Adapting to climate change is, as my hon. Friend indicates, an important task for the farming industry, and a significant proportion of the research that we are funding looks at that. To take a practical example, some very good research is being done at East Malling Research into the ability to produce crops using less water, which will benefit horticulture growers in the country.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) (Con): What will be the impact on food production of the decision to discontinue weed cutting in the lower Avon valley? Is the Secretary of State prepared to meet a delegation of farmers to review the matter?

Hilary Benn: As always, I would be very happy to meet a delegation with the hon. Gentleman.

Food Labelling

12. **Mr. David Jones** (Clwyd, West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues and representatives of the devolved Administrations on country-of-origin food labelling. [305586]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): As I said earlier, I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues and the Food Standards Agency to ensure that we have tighter, clearer and more accurate origin labelling. I have had no discussions with the devolved Administrations.

Mr. Jones: The labelling arrangements as they stand facilitate not only the potential deception of consumers, but the theft of good will built up by generations of Welsh farmers who produce, for example, Welsh lamb. Does the Minister understand how dismayed those farmers will be when they hear of his rather lame response to the points put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert)—that this Government have stood in the way of attempts to change those labelling regulations?

Jim Fitzpatrick: No—as I said a moment ago, we are doing everything we can to protect British produce. I also mentioned that we are celebrating Cornish sardines becoming an EU-protected food name later today. There are 39 other products, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will come to New Covent Garden to see them and celebrate with us.

Economic Downturn (Rural Economy)

13. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the economic downturn on the rural economy. [305587]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris): While the economic downturn is having an impact in both urban and rural areas, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs analysis of data from other Government Departments and the regional development agencies suggests that, when compared with the economy in urban areas, the picture in rural England so far has been more positive.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: Is the Minister aware that some 200,000 people living in rural areas do not have bank accounts; that mainstream banking facilities in rural areas are closing; that pubs, post offices and schools are closing; and that in some areas, village halls are closing because they cannot be maintained? Will the Minister and his Department undertake a review of the position of rural areas as a result of what has been happening recently, not least the recession?

Dan Norris: That is a very important issue, as I know from my own constituency. In June 2009, the Department for Work and Pensions, which is the lead Department for financial inclusion, and the Commission for Rural Communities jointly published a report on financial inclusion in rural areas, "Rural Money Matters", which found that rural areas did not appear to fare worse than urban areas, although it suggested that analysis on a smaller scale would be likely to identify smaller pockets of significant hardship. I am certainly concerned to keep an eye on that.

Bovine Tuberculosis

14. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): How many cattle were slaughtered because of bovine tuberculosis precautions in the last three months. [305588]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): The most recent three-month report available is for the end of August 2009. Between 1 June and 31 August, 5,202 cattle were slaughtered in England for bovine TB control purposes. Figures are provisional and subject to change as more data become available.

Mr. Robathan: I am sure that the Minister is aware of the devastating impact that the slaughter of herds has not only on the farmer's business, but on the farmer and his or her family—it completely destroys their entire life. Furthermore, there are questions about the reliability of the TB tests. How much does the slaughter policy cost and what is the long-term policy, because we cannot just go on slaughtering more and more cattle when it obviously is not working?

Jim Fitzpatrick *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. One answer will do.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman is right. We are sensitive to the tragic impacts on farms, families, regions and areas when TB strikes. The Secretary of State set up the TB eradication group last November. It has met 19 times and has already produced a report that recommended a raft of initiatives to try to deal with this. The problem will only be eradicated in the medium to long term, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Department is doing as much as it can to support the group.

Mushroom Composting (Emissions)

15. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What recent steps have been taken to reduce the level of noxious emissions from mushroom composting. [305589]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris): Mushroom compost-making plants such as that in my hon. Friend's constituency require a permit under the Environmental Permitting Regulations 2007 and local authorities are responsible for enforcing compliance. DEFRA also issues statutory guidance on best available techniques in order to minimise air emissions, including odour.

John Mann: As well as the loss of quality of life in the surrounding houses from the stink from mushroom composting, is the Minister aware of emerging evidence of problems with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a killer disease, caused by people breathing in the spores? Is it not time that action were taken to close down Tunnel Tech in my constituency?

Dan Norris: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his hard work and conscientiousness in bringing this issue to my and my predecessor's attention. The Health Protection Agency is, as of today, investigating the prevalence of COPD in the locality where he has identified concerns. Further, the agency will also investigate the potential for the composting operation to cause or exacerbate COPD. Those investigations will be in consultation with the local primary care trust and I understand that the local council has already made contact with the HPA.

Financial Inclusion

17. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of levels of financial inclusion in rural areas. [305591]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris): DEFRA works hard across Government to ensure that all Departments take account of specific rural needs in their policies. Indeed, I met with my colleague in the Department for Work and Pensions only last month specifically to discuss rural issues.

Ann Winterton: Picking up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), who has pinched yet another question of mine—the problem is that we both come from the same stable—may I reiterate that approximately 200,000 people living in rural England do not have access to broadband

facilities? Would that not aid financial inclusion as it provides access to valuable information, online banking, credit union services and other such services?

Dan Norris: Perhaps the hon. Lady should have some more interesting pillow talk than it appears she is having—*[Laughter.]* She is right: digital communications are crucial in rural areas as well as in urban areas. They make a big difference not least in access to banking and other important services and facilities. We are working hard on that issue and putting extra resources into it, including moneys from heads for which I have specific responsibility.

Food Labelling

19. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on country of origin food labelling. [305593]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a few moments ago. I am delighted to see that we have been joined by the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice). We were a bit worried that since the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds had promoted him to the Privy Council and shadow Secretary of State in its press release this week, he might have been banished by his colleagues.

Mr. Amess: Having heard the exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and the Minister on this subject, I am confused about the Government's position. Will the Minister now clearly say that he supports the *Which?* campaign for country-of-origin food labelling and backs British food?

Jim Fitzpatrick: We do support the campaign for clearer country-of-origin labelling. We took a different position from Europe in respect of mandatory labelling for everything. That would have meant labels a foot long on pizzas identifying the source of every bit of pepperoni. We want clearer labelling so that we can have informed consumer choice and support British agriculture.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): Given that meat production generates six times more greenhouse gas emissions than the production of fish, cheese or vegetables, should CO_2 emissions related to food products not also be included in any future labelling system? Would that not be one of the most effective means of adapting to climate change?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I can tell my hon. Friend that agriculture is making great efforts to reduce the impact of the carbon that it produces. It is very supportive of every effort to increase sustainable production and is doing what it can to tackle climate change.

Single Payment Scheme (Mr. Peter Philpot)

20. **Mr. John Baron** (Billericay) (Con): What progress he has made in resolving the single payment scheme difficulties experienced by Mr. Peter Philpot. [305595]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): Mr. Philpot's single payment scheme claims have been complicated by a number of factors, including both corrections to and transfers of entitlements. Progress has been made recently in resolving the underlying problems and the Rural Payments Agency is working to resolve the outstanding issues and to confirm the results to Mr. Philpot as soon as possible.

Mr. Baron: I thank the Minister for that response. He will be aware that, on 29 October in this place, I raised that issue with the Secretary of State, who kindly agreed to consider it if I sent the relevant paperwork. That was sent the same day, but since then neither my constituent nor my office have heard anything. Will Ministers consider the matter again as a matter of urgency? Otherwise, we can only draw the conclusion that the RPA is nothing more than a master-class in misadministration.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I outlined earlier the dramatically improving performance of the RPA, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take some reassurance from that. I can only apologise that neither he nor Mr. Philpot have received an update of the position. My responses are obviously researched in preparation for questions, and I am told that progress has been made, but I will find out exactly when Mr. Philpot will be told and communicate that to the hon. Gentleman later today, if possible.

Flood Defences (York)

22. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): What plans the Environment Agency has for flood defences for the Leeman road area of York. [305597]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): I am pleased to say that the Environment Agency is developing a flood alleviation scheme for the Leeman Road-Water End area of York. The scheme will cost approximately £6.5 million and protect 550 properties.

Hugh Bayley: It is nine years since the worst flood on record in York. I remember clearly that night when hundreds of local citizens and soldiers built a mile-long wall of sandbags on top of the flood defences to protect 550 homes on Leeman road. We are still waiting for the flood defences to be improved. When will the Environment Agency consult the public on its plans, and when do we expect the improvements to be built?

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I am pleased to confirm that the consultation will begin in early 2010 to help to select the best solution. Subject to funding, construction should begin in early 2012. It is important to get the flood defences in place as soon as possible, subject to consultation.

Topical Questions

T1. [305598] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): DEFRA's responsibility is to help us all to live within our environmental means.

I wish to inform the House that about 100 farms in Cumbria have been severely affected by the recent flooding, in particular by large quantities of stones deposited on their land. I visited two farms affected last week, and I will shortly announce details of help through the rural development programme for England.

Michael Fabricant: I think that the whole House will agree with the Secretary of State and offer its condolences to farmers in Cumbria. However, on another matter, the United Kingdom—that means the British taxpayer—is currently facing a possible £300 million fine for breaching the air quality directive. London is doing something about it. What will DEFRA do to try to avoid the fine?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Fitzpatrick): DEFRA is working carefully to ensure that we are within the scope of the directives. Only two weeks ago, we hosted an air quality summit with local authorities to look at best practice and to share it with many local authorities. We are in close contact with the Mayor of London, because most of the roads where there are problems are in the London area. We are working with him and his officials to try to ensure that together we can solve the problems in London and avoid the fines that might be coming our way.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): Does the Minister share my relief that British Waterways will retain its property portfolio and the income from it? Does he consider that the third sector model that British Waterways is now pursuing will enable it to work more closely with local communities, such as that around Rudyard lake, which is concerned about sailability and is fighting for facilities for disabled people at the lake?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend and members of Rudyard Sailability recently to see the excellent work that they do. Everyone is concerned to ensure a satisfactory resolution as soon as possible, so that the work can continue. The Treasury has acknowledged that the mutual or third sector model is an interesting way forward and it is keen to explore it. I am sure that the Treasury will be seeking views from hon. Members and others on how the idea can be fleshed out, because it offers an exciting prospect for building on the good will that exists towards our waterways.

T3. [305601] **Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Every year Kettering borough council has to round up about 250 stray dogs from across the borough, most of which do not have collars or microchips. Given the Department's responsibilities for animal welfare, especially in the run-up to Christmas, what more can the Government do to promote responsible dog ownership?

Jim Fitzpatrick: We certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should do everything that we can to achieve responsible dog ownership. I visited the Dogs Trust re-homing centre in Harefield to support its annual campaign, which raises awareness with the message that a dog is for life, not just for Christmas. There are dogs charities and dog organisations all over the UK trying to get the message home, and we want to do the same. Dog licensing did not work. Chipping is a more modern, technologically superior, less expensive and less bureaucratic system, and it may be something that we want to consider in future. Chipping is not under consideration at the moment, but one can never close the door entirely, particularly to improvements in the welfare of animals.

T2. [305599] **Jessica Morden** (Newport, East) (Lab): The Environment Agency is running an event today to raise awareness of flooding in my constituency. Although that is a welcome initiative, does the Minister agree that sustained and long-term investment in flood defences is what will really bring peace of mind to my constituents?

Huw Irranca-Davies: Indeed. I congratulate my hon. Friend on promoting the use of forestry and woodlands for a variety of purposes. We have come to recognise that forestries have not only an intrinsic value, but a value in respect of climate change, carbon and flood alleviation. Forestries also have a prominent role to play in many other respects. I applaud the work that she does to promote those ways forward.

T4. [305602] **Mr. Roger Williams** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): Today many Agriculture Ministers will be meeting in Paris to discuss the regulation of agricultural markets and the future of the common agricultural policy. I understand that Conservative shadow Ministers recently visited New Zealand to consider the future of farming without subsidies. Can the Secretary of State explain his position on the future of the common agricultural policy and whether it would include an element of co-funding or direct payment by nation states?

Hilary Benn: The UK will be represented at today's meeting in Paris, but no Ministers are there for the simple reason that Ministers are here in the Chamber answering questions. Our policy on reform of the common agricultural policy has been set out clearly in the past. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been a leading advocate of reform and a strong supporter of a shift in funding towards pillar two and agri-environment schemes, for the reasons that we have already covered in questions so far.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that windrow composting is now widespread, with more than 40 sites throughout the UK. However, it presents a danger: it is smelly and dirty, and it involves the release of Aspergillus fungus spores, which are a danger to health. What is he doing to encourage local authorities to join together to provide ways forward for other energy systems, such as the anaerobic digestion system? Is that something that he is working on?

Hilary Benn: It certainly is. I am aware of the close interest that my hon. Friend takes in the issue that he has raised. We doubled the incentives for anaerobic digestion under the renewables obligation system from 1 April this year. I am putting in about £10 million for demonstration projects, and when feed-in tariffs come in, they will add a further incentive. The House recognises that we are talking about a technology of the future. It is about to take off, and I encourage farmers and others who are responsible for green waste to look into it.

T6. [305604] **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): One question only this time, Mr. Speaker. The British people are rightly concerned about animal welfare, and will broadly welcome the phasing out of battery cages in 2012. However, they do not wish to see imports of eggs and other chicken products from countries outside the EU that still raise animals in poor conditions and in batteries. What will the Government do to prevent the import of eggs and other chicken products that have been produced using poor welfare standards outside the EU?

Jim Fitzpatrick: As I discussed with the egg and poultry conference about two weeks ago, our position is still to hold firmly to the 2012 ban on battery cages. I was asked what plan B was. Plan B is to lobby the Commission to ensure that there are no imports of eggs from countries with lower standards, and to introduce a new marking number—No. 4—for those eggs that fall below standard. That is plan B, but we have not yet given up on plan A, which is to hold firm, and hope that the Commission holds firm, to the ban on battery cages that will come in in 2012.

T5. [305603] **Tony Lloyd** (Manchester, Central) (Lab): May I ask my hon. Friends about insect pollinator research funding? In particular, can they allay the fears of those involved that the method of assessment of such research projects could lead to big gaps in essential research areas such as husbandry for bee keeping and in the money being devoted to honey bees and bees generally? We do not need elegant academic research; we need a practical result that will save the honey bee.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Norris): I certainly can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government take the health of Britain's bees and other pollinators very seriously indeed. The decline in bee health is a complex issue with no single cause. The insect pollinator initiative consortium has now considered the expressions of interest received and has invited four research bids for the £10 million that has been made available. It will make its final decisions on allocations early next year. In the interim, it is crucial that all interested parties play an active role in DEFRA's healthy bees plan in order to tackle this hugely important and complex issue. They have a lot to say, and lots of expertise, and we want to hear from them.

T7. [305605] **Mr. David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I met representatives of the Environment Agency this week to discuss flood and river issues affecting my constituency, and I was advised that, despite efforts to tackle domestic and commercial waste dumping, there are still problems with people dumping waste in our rivers. What recent assessment has the Minister made of this problem, and what action are the Government taking to try to tackle it?

Huw Irranca-Davies: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There is so much good work being carried out by the Environment Agency and by volunteer groups around the country, including in my own constituency. I am sure that, like me, he has spent many happy weekends knee deep in the waters—subject to the Environment Agency's approval, of course. I will happily look at the issue that he has raised and drop him a line to give him the state of progress.

T9. [305607] **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): Since I was first elected as MP for the City of York, the Minister's Department has moved hundreds of jobs to its offices at Kings Pool in my city. There is now a major development site right next to Kings Pool that would allow DEFRA to build additional office space if it wanted to transfer more staff from London and the south-east to the north of England. Will the Secretary of State ask his director of estates to look at the real estate possibilities in York, and consider whether they would help the Department to deal with its staff relocation plans?

Hilary Benn: I promise to take careful note of the kind bid that my hon. Friend has made. Perhaps it will be the first of many.

T8. [305606] **Paul Rowen** (Rochdale) (LD): The Commons Act 2006 placed additional duties and responsibilities on those who hold commons rights. It has been brought to my attention that the lord of the manor of Rochdale, who is a New Zealand resident, has claimed title to considerably more common land than he is entitled to. Will the Minister undertake to look into this with the Land Valuation Office? Residents in the Littleborough area of my constituency are seriously concerned about the effect that that decision is having on them.

Hilary Benn: Very gladly. If the hon. Gentleman will give me further details, I will do precisely that.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What are the Government doing to encourage the producers and retailers of halal meat to increase the use of pre-stunning, which is compliant with the Koran and which would have significant welfare, economic and political benefits?

Jim Fitzpatrick: There are no plans to change the regulations on religious slaughter as they stand at the moment. My hon. Friend and I have had a meeting with some of his constituents in the past month to discuss this issue in depth. We obviously encourage support for the regulations as they stand, but there are no plans to change the status quo.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): The proposed Milton Keynes-Bedford canal enjoys cross-party support and will bring many benefits to the region. It has interesting financial arrangements and could well go ahead, but it is stalling at the moment. Will the Minister use his influence to get the project moving again?

Huw Irranca-Davies: For obvious reasons we try not to intervene in individual projects, recognising that British Waterways has a good overview and has achieved a lot in the past decade in opening up new stretches of canals that had fallen into disrepair. I wish the project well and if the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I shall take a look at it. I applaud the enthusiasm of the people who

want to open that stretch. We have many such instances across the country, showing why the strength and enthusiasm of volunteers are such a bedrock of the British Waterways network.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): Many farmers are challenging new maps from the Rural Payments Agency. Will the Minister consider looking at an RPA presence on the ground so that a more constructive process for challenge could be developed, along the lines of moving towards stewardship applications with which farmers seem much happier?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The progress on re-mapping the country is steady. Earlier this week I chaired a meeting between the RPA, the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Agency and the Tenant Farmers Association, which are relatively pleased with the progress that has been made on a complex issue. There are deadlines in January that we have to meet and we are working as hard as we can to ensure that that takes place, so that we can pre-populate the maps for next year's claims. At the same time, we welcome the progress made in the payments for 2009.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give an updated statement on the surface water charges that affect sports grounds, churches and charities?

Huw Irranca-Davies: I am pleased to give an update. My hon. Friend and others who have lobbied assiduously on that matter will be pleased to know that the issue appears in our Flood and Water Management Bill. With the support of this House and the other place, we will get that measure on to the statute book and protect scouts associations, churches, community halls and others.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): In light of the outbreak of the fatal disease swine fever in Russia, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to re-examine our bio-security arrangements?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point and he will know that we are always vigilant. The teams monitor carefully what is happening elsewhere and he can rest assured that we will do what is required in light of the evidence. If he would be interested—I am sure he would—I will be happy to write to him further.

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): The Secretary of State may be aware that there is great local concern that sites have been identified for potential land raise facilities for waste disposal on the boundary between my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker). Will he give a clear statement that he believes that such approaches are increasingly out of date and unacceptable and that we should be looking for approaches that generate energy from waste, rather than just dumping it, often in inappropriate locations?

Hilary Benn: I agree with the hon. Gentleman completely. We need to get our landfill down, which is why—because of the landfill levy—domestic recycling rates have risen from 8 to 37 per cent. in the past 12 years. I shall be consulting after the turn of the year on whether we should ban certain products from landfill. Food waste is a good example; why put it in landfill when we could turn it into energy?

Business of the House

11.33 am

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): The business for the forthcoming week is:

MONDAY 14 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Personal Care at Home Bill, followed by proceedings on the Consolidated Fund Bill.

TUESDAY 15 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Flood and Water Management Bill, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to Welsh language.

WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER—Motion on the Christmas recess Adjournment.

The provisional business for the week commencing 4 January will include:

MONDAY 4 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 5 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Fiscal Responsibility Bill.

WEDNESDAY 6 JANUARY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Video Recordings Bill.

THURSDAY 7 JANUARY—A general debate on the pre-Budget report.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 January will include:

MONDAY 11 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Children, Schools and Families Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 7 January will be:

THURSDAY 7 JANUARY—A debate from the Public Administration Committee on "Lobbying: Access and Influence in Whitehall".

Through you, Mr. Speaker, may I also offer my best wishes for Christmas and the new year to all hon. Members, and on behalf of all hon. Members, may I offer our best wishes for Christmas and the new year to the Clerks of the House, the Officers of the House, catering teams, the cleaners, the police, the doorkeepers, and all who work so hard to keep the House running smoothly? I think that everyone deserves a very good Christmas and new year.

Sir George Young: May I thank the Leader of the House for giving us next week's business?

I warmly welcome the change from the right hon. and learned Lady's initial refusal to allow time for a dedicated debate on the pre-Budget report. The House will want to discuss the issues raised by the Chancellor's statement of yesterday, and we will particularly welcome the chance to highlight that the Government's pay freeze will hit the poorest public sector workers, unlike our proposals, which excluded the million lowest paid employees. This debate will also give Ministers the opportunity to explain the cost to the NHS of the rise in national insurance.

If I am on a winning streak in asking for debates, may I repeat my other request, for a debate on Afghanistan? I appreciate the efforts that the right hon. and learned Lady is making to ensure that every week we get an opportunity to question Ministers on Afghanistan, but does she appreciate that Members are looking for a more substantial opportunity to discuss Government policy on Afghanistan, particularly in advance of the proposed London summit at the end of January, so can we have a full day's debate, in Government time, early in the new year?

I welcome today's written ministerial statement from the Leader of the House on the Kelly report. We are relieved that the Government have finally accepted our arguments that legislation is needed now to implement Kelly in full. Can the right hon. and learned Lady give an indication of when this proposed legislation will be brought forward and whether it will take the form of a stand-alone Bill or an amendment to existing legislation?

When may we debate the motion on private Members' Bills, which has been languishing on the Order Paper for more than a week? Unless we debate and resolve the issue soon, we will run the risk of not debating any private Members' Bills at all in this Session.

May we have a debate on yesterday's report from the Public Administration Committee on the unsatisfactory handling of the special report from the ombudsman on Equitable Life? As the Committee recommends, a mechanism needs to be found so that we can debate findings from the ombudsman without having to rely on either Government or Opposition motions. Does the right hon. and learned Lady agree that it would be sensible for the Government to respond to that recommendation during the debate on the Wright Committee report on Commons reform?

In the same vein, when will we debate and vote on the Procedure Committee's report on the election of Deputy Speakers? This is an initiative from you, Mr Speaker, which requires action if we are to get a new system in place before the beginning of the next Parliament. The Procedure Committee has said that it is seeking the endorsement of the House. When might it secure it?

May we have a debate on the Copenhagen agreement early in the new year? This is an historic moment, which we hope will deliver a real and meaningful settlement. Given that, will the right hon. and learned Lady ensure that the House is able to debate the conclusions of Copenhagen in full, and its implications for the UK?

Finally, as the right hon. and learned Lady has made clear, astonishingly, this is the last business question before Christmas, so, despite the fact that many people have yet to send a single Christmas card, I, too, would like to take this opportunity to offer you, Mr. Speaker, and all hon. Members including the right hon. and learned Lady, as well as all the staff and Officers, from the Clerks to the caterers, the cleaners, the police and the doorkeepers, a very happy Christmas and new year.

Ms Harman: I am happy to accede to the right hon. Gentleman's request for a debate on the pre-Budget report, and I have announced that. We are also looking for an opportunity to hold a debate on Afghanistan, and, given the context of the London summit, it is obviously even more important that the House has an opportunity to debate the issue, as well as hearing statements from Ministers, which have been made regularly, and hearing from the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's Question Time when he answers on the subject.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about the Kelly report and legislation to take forward Sir Christopher Kelly's proposals. We all recognise that the House had to deal with the public anger and concern about the abuse of the allowance system by some Members. The House did not sit back waiting for Kelly. We have already substantially changed the allowance system and legislated for the establishment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. As the right hon. Gentleman recognises, there will be further legislation, particularly to make it the responsibility of IPSA to decide Members of Parliament's pay and pensions. We had, of course, already voted not to decide our own pay, but we will now bring forward legislation to put that on a statutory footing. I am not yet in a position to tell him and the House whether that legislation will stand alone or be added to existing legislation, but, whatever the vehicle, we are determined, and the whole House is agreed, that we should go forward on that basis. There is, as he said, a motion outstanding for debate on private Members' business. It is important that that is taken forward, and it will be.

On Equitable Life, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out in the Opposition day debate on Equitable Life, Sir John Chadwick will produce an interim report by the end of the year, and a final report in the spring. He is hard at work on that very important business.

The election of Deputy Speakers has been considered by the Wright Committee. The Committee has also considered how the House chooses the Chairs and members of Select Committees, how the public can provide input to debates in the House of Commons through petitions and how House business is managed. I have written to Opposition parties about those issues, because how we should make progress on them is a House matter; it is not for Government diktat. We want to achieve consensus and we want to bring forward a motion on which both sides of the House can agree. I have asked Opposition parties to give me their views on all the issues that the Wright Committee has dealt with, so that I can introduce promptly, within the time limit that is expected of the Government, a motion that will achieve consensus, so that we can go forward with that important Committee's proposals.

On the right hon. Gentleman's festive comments, did he say that he had not sent a single Christmas card yet?

Sir George Young: I said that some people have not.

Ms Harman: Well, it could be said that the shadow Leader of the House is not one of the most cheerful Members of the House—*[Interruption.]* No, he is not. However, this is the time for Christmas parties. Even though it has been a very difficult year for the House and for the economy, we should not ignore the festive season altogether. With that in mind, I have been thinking about what we should all sing if we were to have a karaoke party, and I have allocated to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) the karaoke number, "Remember You're a Womble". As the shadow Leader of the House is really the Morrissey of the House, I have chosen for him the Smiths number, "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now", and for myself, I have taken a Billy Joel number, "Uptown Girl".

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Ho, ho, ho, Mr. Speaker. *[Laughter.]* May I wish you and all our staff and Officers of the House a Happy Christmas?

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): And us?

Mr. Heath: And all Members of the House, including even the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Robathan: Thank you very much.

Mr. Heath: I, too, welcome the fact that there is to be a debate on the pre-Budget report. I fear that it is unravelling at such speed that we may have to have an alternative pre-Budget report before the original is even debated to correct some of the errors in the first one. Nevertheless, that debate is welcome.

On private Members' Bills—here, I declare an interest—I am very keen, obviously, that time should be set aside for private Members' Bills and that the resolutions should be considered. However, that is one of the matters discussed in the Wright Committee report, which suggests an alternative arrangement for dealing with private Members' Bills. I cannot for the life of me see what the problem is, given that the Committee has produced a draft resolution, on page 94, to be put before the House. It is not for me, or the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) or the right hon. and learned Lady to decide what is appropriate; it is for the House to decide. The Wright Committee has set out its draft proposals. Why cannot they now be put before the House?

There will be a debate on universities after today's statements. No doubt, the issue of the fiasco and chaos of the Student Loans Company will be considered, but it would be appropriate to have a statement from the Secretary of State to tell us just what has been happening. More importantly, what is being done about the company's senior management and chief executive? They have let down students across the country, who now find themselves in extreme difficulty. Will there be a statement to that effect?

May we have a debate on what I can only term abuse of section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 by police? It is not satisfactory that people up and down the country are being stopped and told that they cannot take photographs—and if they have taken photographs, they are asked to delete them from their cameras—apparently on the whim of police officers. So far, people have been told that they cannot take a picture of Christ Church in the City, St. Paul's, railway wagons, Christmas lights—and of Mick's Plaice, a fish and chip shop in Chatham! Such photography is not prime terrorist activity. I honestly think that the police need some education about the very strong powers that we in this House give them, to make sure that they are not used improperly.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): You didn't say that during the miners' strike.

Mr. Heath: I did, actually.

Lastly, I know that the Leader of the House is committed to the use of plain English in enactments and Government pronouncements. She has said so many times and has gone to great trouble to provide easy-to-read translations of what might otherwise be opaque in the Bills under her own control. However, may I draw her attention to the statement made earlier this week about smarter Government? I shall read out one of the conclusions of the attached paper. It states:

"We will align the different sector-specific performance management frameworks across key local agencies…thereby increasing the focus on indicators relating to joint outcomes."

[Mr. Heath]

Does that make any sense at all? I do not believe that it does. This management-speak is nonsense, so will the Leader of the House eradicate it from Government business?

Again, happy Christmas!

Ms Harman: On the pre-Budget report, there will be a debate when the House returns in the new year, but there is also Treasury questions next week and hon. Members can ask questions and raise issues then.

On the Wright Committee report, I think that it is perverse of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) to object to being consulted. I will bring the proceedings before the House, but I am consulting the Opposition Front-Bench teams. Of course it is a matter for the whole House, and for Back Benchers on all sides as well as for those on the Front Benches, but it is not unreasonable to give the Front-Bench teams an opportunity to give their views as to what should be brought to the House. However, if they do not want to be consulted, they do not need to respond. I have given them until 16 December.

The debate this afternoon on students and universities will provide an opportunity to discuss the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

The hon. Gentleman raised concerns about terrorism, and I can tell him that there are Home Office questions next week when they could be discussed. He also made a point about the smarter Government publication and plain English. If he could pass me a copy of what he read out, I shall work out a translation for him before the end of business questions this morning.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. No fewer than 23 hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. As always, I would like to get everybody in. Members will be conscious that there is a ministerial statement to follow, and that underlines the importance of short questions and answers.

Natascha Engel (North-East Derbyshire) (Lab): May I add my voice to those hon. Members calling for a debate on the parliamentary reform Select Committee, of which I was a member? I urge my right hon. and learned Friend to read the minority report submitted by myself and the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), which at least indicates that there was no consensus on the Committee. I think that a debate would show that, although we were a minority on the Committee, we would be in the majority in the House.

Ms Harman: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on the Committee. The issues that she teased out in her minority report show that although the principles and objectives are clear and shared by everyone, how we put them into practice is far from straightforward and needs proper consideration.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Given that the country is bust and there is now no money for anything, that the recent local government reorganisation in Cornwall trebled in cost from £20 million to £60 million and that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has said that any legislation enacted by this Government to reorganise local government, particularly in Devon, would be changed by legislation by an incoming Tory Government, will the Leader of the House have a word with her colleague the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and ask him to come to the House before Christmas to make a statement to end the uncertainties surrounding local government reorganisation in Devon and elsewhere?

Ms Harman: We have had a debate on local government this week, but I shall ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend ensure that we have an early debate on defence procurement, so that Britain's world-class defence industrial base will get the full benefit in these difficult economic times of the Ministry of Defence's substantial budget?

Ms Harman: This is of importance to not only the MOD, but the regions from which our procurement is obtained and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. I shall raise my hon. Friend's comments with the Ministers concerned.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Would the Leader of the House ensure that the Wright report and the minority report are debated side by side with the report on the election of Deputy Speakers? Could we have a full day for that, not one that is delayed by statements, so that many people can take part in the debate?

Ms Harman: I take note of those points, which are seriously made. I should say that we often decide that we really want to protect a day, and on such days, for example, Opposition days, we never want to put on Government statements. That is because our doing so encroaches on the Opposition's time for the subject that they have chosen for debate. Sometimes statements are made because of a genuine emergency and we have to bring them to the House. Obviously, I want to ensure that there is a full day's debate on the Wright report, but I cannot guarantee that a statement will not need to be made to the House.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): People from Toyoda Gosei, the Japanese car parts factory in my constituency, wrote to me recently saying that they had 30 different nationalities employed there. Could we have a debate on hiring practices, because although I am sure that its hiring practices are completely non-discriminatory, there is widespread concern in south Yorkshire that employers are perhaps not giving a fair crack to local Yorkshiremen and women, and we need to discuss with employers how to bring more of the local work force into active work?

Ms Harman: It is important not only that we have training, high skill levels and the appropriate skill levels in the local community for the jobs that are available, but that those jobs are made available through the jobcentres and that the regional development agencies work with employers to make sure that agencies that do not just choose workers from abroad are used. My right hon. Friend makes an important point and it is being taken forward.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): May I welcome the Leader of the House's assurance that the debate on the Wright Committee's proposals will not be delayed by Front-Bench discussions? Does she intend that debate to take place before the end of January?

Ms Harman: As I told the House at last week's business questions, there is a time period within which it is expected that the Government would respond to Select Committee reports, and we expect to respond within that time period. In this case, I believe that that more or less finishes at the end of January, but we are not waiting until the last moment and we will respond when we can, after we are satisfied that there is a reasonable consensus as a basis on which we can then debate the report and reach agreement.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is aware of the report that was published today about the health needs of children in immigration detention centres. I know that the Government have improved the situation, but recently a child in my constituency was badly emotionally damaged by the experience of going into a detention centre. When can we have a debate in which we can consider ending the practice of families with children being put into immigration detention centres?

Ms Harman: We want to make absolutely sure that children do not suffer just because their parents have not abided by the immigration rules and regulations. Perhaps my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to raise her question during Home Office questions next week.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Leader of the House is wrong in her choice of karaoke song—surely the appropriate Smiths song for my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House is "This Charming Man".

Could the Leader of the House organise a debate in Government time on immigration policy, specifically so that the House can debate the Home Secretary's interesting remarks last night? He said that the Conservative policy of an immigration cap was a "legitimate option" within the debate. I am glad that the Home Secretary is coming to recognise the wisdom of Conservative immigration policy, as all reasonable people do. If he is going to do a U-turn, the whole House would want him to do so in this place so that we could welcome it warmly.

Mr. Speaker: That question was, frankly, too long, albeit that it was amusing in parts. I hope that others will not seek to imitate the Green model.

Ms Harman: The Home Secretary has certainly not done a U-turn. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be able to raise that point with the Home Secretary in Home Office questions next week. I am going to look at the hon. Gentleman in a different light after he has shown himself to be a true Smiths fan.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend will know that in this very rich city of London this Christmas will be a hard one for many people. Is she aware that the centre for runaway children run by the St. Christopher's charity is in danger of closing down? Could we have a debate on this? The fact is that we should keep this precious resource going and that St. Christopher's does a wonderful job for runaway children—not only those from London, but those from all our constituencies up and down the country.

Ms Harman: Obviously everybody is concerned at all times of the year, but particularly at Christmas, about children who are not with their family and about whom their family are desperately concerned, and about what provision exists for such children. I shall raise the point about St. Christopher's with the relevant Minister.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): The future integrity, independence and authority of this House depends upon the implementation of the proposals of the Reform of the House of Commons Committee and the Procedure Committee. Will the Leader of the House give me and the House a firm commitment that these proposals will be decided on a genuine free vote, unencumbered by the Whips on either side of the House?

Ms Harman: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman should foster any sense of apocalypse about this. We should all seek to work together to maintain the integrity, independence and authority of the House. Of course we will have a debate on the Wright Committee report, and it will be on a free vote. Members should jealously guard their free vote on House issues.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North) (Lab): On the Wright report, may I point out that it is important to remember that this is a political institution, that political parties exist for a reason and that this House would never ever survive a day's business without the workings of the usual channels and the Whips Offices? Will my right hon. and learned Friend bear that in mind in her deliberations?

Ms Harman: It is also worth our reminding ourselves that we are all elected on a manifesto, whereby we make promises to our constituents that if we get elected we will strive to keep our promises. One thing that would undermine our democracy is if we got elected to this House and then did not deliver on our manifesto commitments. That is why we have a majority Government, rather than a minority Government, and why it is the job of the Government to deliver their business in order to keep their manifesto promises.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): On environmental protection, is the Leader of the House aware that today the Flood Risk Regulations 2009, statutory instrument No. 3042, come into force? They have not been consulted on or scrutinised by this House or issued to all the relevant parties. Will she issue an apology to the House? Will she castigate the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for this? Will she assure us that these regulations will not come into force today, and that they will be properly scrutinised and properly consulted upon? They form part of the Flood and Water Management Bill—she just announced that it will have its Second Reading next week. The DEFRA Whip on the Treasury Bench—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I think that there was a request for a statement next week somewhere in her remarks, but I did not readily identify it. I call the Leader of the House.

Ms Harman: We have just had DEFRA questions. I can reassure the hon. Lady, if she did not manage to raise her question with DEFRA Ministers, that all procedures were followed. Anyway, there is a debate on flood and water management next week, in which she might seek to catch Mr. Speaker's eye and to make her comments.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House pass on my thanks to the Chancellor for making a statement on getting serious about tax avoidance? One can hear the breaking of glass in News Corporation and the Telegraph Media Group. With that in mind, there is no better place to start than media groups to ensure that they pay an appropriate amount of tax in this country. Will she ensure that that is taken forward?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important for companies and corporations to pay their taxes in this country and for individuals to do so, too. There is a particular issue for us in the House of Commons and for people who seek to come into the House of Commons. It used to be said that there should be no taxation without representation. We raise the taxes—we pass the Finance Acts—and so we should turn it around and say that there should be no representation without taxation. The idea that someone should purport to come into this House to make other people pay taxes while saying for tax purposes that they do not live in this country is bizarre.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): Will the Leader of the House, in her busy schedule before Christmas, take the time to draw the Foreign Secretary's attention to early-day motions on the situation in Kurdistan, and particularly the adversely altered imprisonment arrangements for Abdullah Ocalan? If he were to pass away in Turkish custody, the security of us all would be greatly compromised.

Ms Harman: I know that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about this matter. There will be an opportunity next week in the pre-recess Adjournment debate, if he thinks that it is appropriate, for him to set out those points in more detail.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the wonderful Christmas party in your apartments yesterday. It was much appreciated by my granddaughter.

May I ask for an early debate based on early-day motion 346, on organ donors?

[That this House notes that 10-year-old George Higginson, who was tragically killed in a road traffic accident, donated his organs as gifts of life to five other people; wishes to pay tribute to the courage and selflessness of his parents who continue to support and promote organ donation; and supports Mr Higginson's suggestion that arrangements be made at polling stations to give people an opportunity to register as an organ donor whilst voting at the forthcoming general election.]

It was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith). The final sentence reads that

"arrangements be made at polling stations to give people an opportunity to register as an organ donor whilst voting at the forthcoming general election."

From my experience of bereavement because of a sudden accidental death, I know that it would certainly have helped me to have known that my late husband's organs had been used to save the lives of other people.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I said to the House last week that we would look into whether information about signing up to the register of organ donors could be made available at polling stations. I am interested in my hon. Friend's comments about the Christmas party. Did they have karaoke at it, I wonder?

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): This is not a politically sexy subject, but it is an essential one that underpins freedom of speech, innovation and research, and societal change. Scientists and academics have a duty to criticise publicly the poor research and unsubstantiated claims of others in the public domain, but it seems to me that they are often silenced through fear and threat of lengthy and costly libel actions. May I urge the right hon. and learned Lady to hold a debate as soon as possible on UK libel laws?

Ms Harman: I shall raise the hon. Gentleman's point with the Justice Secretary.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Leader of the House's song should, of course, be "Young Love".

May we have a debate on the private finance initiative? As each successive report comes out, it appears that it is prohibitive in cost, flawed in concept and intolerable in consequence for our nation. With hundreds of billions of pounds stored up over the generations, it would help if we were to reform or abolish it. It would certainly assist the Chancellor in bridging the various financial gaps that he described to the House yesterday.

Ms Harman: The private finance initiative is massively changed from when it was originally embarked on. The reality is that in every constituency throughout the country we have really important capital projects—hospitals, schools and housing—that have been brought forward earlier because of the PFI system.

The question gives me an opportunity to reply to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who asked me to translate "Putting the Frontline First". On his point—I will not read it all out again—the quotation basically concerned the fact that performance management indicators should be common across the different Departments, rather than each Department having a different performance management indicator, pulling in different directions. It is really about partnership working towards common objectives, which is probably gobbledegook in itself.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): During the holocaust, a Foreign Office official infamously wrote a minute in which he referred to the time being wasted

by what he called "wailing Jews". When Mr. Rowan Laxton, the head of the south Asia desk at the Foreign Office, was convicted in September of an outburst in which he referred to "f— Jews" and was fined £350, his barrister said that that was

"going to have very grave and long-term consequences"

and that

"whatever happens in court is secondary to the effect it will have on his career and reputation".

Given that he has been reinstated in the Foreign Office and appointed to a new job and that that job has not been revealed, may we have a statement confirming that the job will have nothing whatsoever to do with the middle east?

Ms Harman: In the sort of situation that the hon. Gentleman has raised, which concerns an individual employee of the civil service, I am not in a position to answer the question. However, as regards his overall point about the horror of anti-Semitism, I know that I can look to him to support the measures that we will introduce in the Equality Bill to give proper, strong legal protection so that people are not discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of their religion.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware that every day this week, thanks to your good offices, Mr. Speaker, school choirs have been able to sing in Portcullis House? At 1 o'clock today, Priory school from my constituency will be singing. Will my right hon. and learned Friend be able to join me in the audience and encourage other Members to be there, too?

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): They are up against the quality of Chorley yesterday.

Ms Harman: I, too, pay tribute to all the schools who have come to Portcullis House, to you, Mr. Speaker, for initiating this, and to those hon. Members who have brought their schools here. I thank my hon. Friend for the invitation and I shall go.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Chorley school was excellent yesterday—I heard them.

Is it possible to have an early debate on the importance of community hospitals? Clitheroe hospital in my constituency provides a tremendous service to local people. A lot of rural villages use it and, as the Leader of the House knows, we do not have the same bus service as everyone else and a lot of people do not have access to cars to be able to go to the main hospitals. It was due to be replaced with a £12 million new hospital, but that has now been frozen while the trust considers the availability and provision of new services. Please may we have a debate on this subject? It is supposed to be a national health service that also includes rural areas.

Ms Harman: Absolutely it should. People locally, through the local health service organisations in consultation with hon. Members, patients' organisations and the local community should decide where those services are put. I suggest that if the hon. Gentleman is not happy with the proposals, he should write to the Secretary of State and ask to meet him to discuss this.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): May we have a debate on sentencing so that we can discuss the case of Gregory Davis, who killed my constituent, Dorothy Rogers, by stabbing her 31 times and then chased her son, Michael, into the school playground and killed him, too? Does the Leader of the House at least understand the anger of my constituents at the news that after just six years, Mr. Davis is now enjoying unsupervised day visits to Oxford and could be released within weeks?

Ms Harman: Everyone will have absolute heartfelt sympathy for the relatives of Dorothy Rogers and her son Michael and will appreciate the concerns that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman on behalf of his constituents about the situation as regards Gregory Davis. Because the hon. Gentleman was able to give me notice of his question, I have already talked about this matter with the Justice Secretary, who has been looking into it this morning. He is happy to invite the hon. Gentleman to a meeting on this subject. The sentence was handed down by the courts but Gregory Davis was then transferred to a psychiatric facility. I think that we can all understand the concerns and a meeting with the Justice Secretary will be very important.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Under Standing Order No. 14, the Government are required to bring forward 13 days for private Members' business. Private Members' Bills will be presented next Wednesday, and unless by then the Government have nominated dates on which their Second Readings may be taken, the system will collapse. Will the Leader of the House name those 13 days, or provide a debate on changing the Standing Order?

Ms Harman: A motion has been tabled to amend the Standing Orders to provide for private Members' business in a Session that will inevitably be shorter than usual. However, the system will certainly not fall into chaos; it will proceed in an orderly and democratic way.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): May we have a debate on winter fuel payments and the need for regular review and uprating of those payments to pensioners? In that debate, we could also address the issue highlighted in early-day motion 407, which points out that those who reach the age of 80 after 27 September will not qualify for payments in the following year.

[That this House congratulates the Government on the provision of winter fuel payments for those aged 60 and over; further congratulates the Government on providing an increase in the payment for those aged 80 and over; notes with concern, however, that those people who turn 80 after the arbitrary date of 27 September are not eligible for the increased payments throughout the following winter; and therefore calls on the Government to change the qualifying date to ensure that those aged 80 on or before 31 December receive the increased payment in the year they are 80.]

Ms Harman: There will be a benefits uprating statement this afternoon, and the Prime Minister spoke about the matter during yesterday's Prime Minister's questions. If there is anything further that the hon. Gentleman would like to raise, perhaps he will write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and keep the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland informed about his concerns.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House was asked whether we could have a debate—or a statement at least—about the fiasco involving the Student Loans Company. It is not good enough for her to say that there is, coincidentally, a general debate on higher education this afternoon. There is a damning report about the Student Loans Company and ministerial involvement in it. It might be just one of those things for the right hon. and learned Lady, but students are suffering fear and hardship, night and day, and we want a statement in the House.

Ms Harman: Hon. Members will have an opportunity to ask their questions and to get them answered by a Minister during this afternoon's estimates debate. I would have thought that the point for Members is whether it is possible for them to raise the issue and get a response, whether that is as part of a topical debate, an estimates day or any other business. The question is whether there is an opportunity, and the answer is yes.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As this is meant to be the season of good will, is it not extremely mean-spirited and Scrooge-like of the Leader of the House to try to restrict debate on private Members' business in the new year to just eight days, instead of the statutory 13, especially when most of the Bills at the top of the list are being promoted by Labour Members?

Ms Harman: If we have a shorter Session, there are fewer days for private Members' business, so this is just proportionality—there is nothing unusual at all.

Benefits Uprating

12.13 pm

The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society (Angela Eagle): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about benefits uprating and how that supports the action that the Government have taken to help people through the global recession. I shall place full details of the uprating in the Vote Office and arrange for the figures to be published in the *Official Report* at the earliest opportunity.

As the global recession, which had its origins in the US sub-prime market, began, we said that we would act to protect people in the UK. Since then, the Government have taken decisive action to support families, jobs and businesses. As the effects of the credit crunch spread to the real economy, we acted to protect people's deposits in banks and to stabilise the wider financial system. Then we acted by making available an additional £5 billion to help people in the labour market to remain in work or get back to work as quickly as possible. We ensured that the Jobcentre Plus network and our providers could not only maintain but increase our support to the increased numbers needing help.

We were determined not to lose a generation of young people to work, which is why we set up the future jobs fund and why we will now guarantee every 18 to 24 year-old who has been unemployed for six months a job, a training place or a volunteering opportunity. The action that we have taken has had an impact. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will lay out further measures in our "Back to Work" White Paper next week.

Let me turn to the statement. I wish to tell the House that we will act to provide real help for people when they need it most during the early stages of recovery. People of working age who are claiming income-related benefits will have their benefits uprated in line with the Rossi index, which is the retail prices index less housing costs. That means that people who receive benefits such as jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance, and incapacity benefit will receive an increase of 1.8 per cent from April 2010.

For those benefits that are traditionally uprated in line with the retail prices index, this year, as a consequence of the extraordinary global conditions, the RPI has moved into negative territory—it stood at minus 1.4 per cent in September. That means that those who rely on benefits being uprated by the retail prices index could have expected to see their benefits frozen in cash terms, which would have meant no increase at all next April. However, because the Government continue to demonstrate their commitment to helping the poorest and most vulnerable in society, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has decided that those benefits should be increased by 1.5 per cent. from April 2010. That means that we will increase benefits for disabled people and carers, and statutory payments for parents and others who receive national insurance-linked benefits, by 1.5 per cent from next April. Recipients of attendance allowance, carer's allowance, disability living allowance, and maternity allowances will have those important benefits uprated to ensure that they do not fall behind.

The basic state pension is traditionally uprated in line with the retail prices index, but as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed in yesterday's pre-Budget

statement, the basic state pension will be uprated by 2.5 per cent from April 2010. That means that, from April next year, the basic state pension for a single person will rise by £2.40 to £97.65 a week, while the standard rate based on spouse's or civil partner's contribution will increase to £58.50, giving a pensioner couple a total of £156.15 a week. That above-inflation increase, which is delivered as a result of a commitment by this Government, will ensure that more than 11 million pensioners receive a real-terms increase in the value of their basic state pension.

The uprating of state additional pension feeds directly through to public service pensions and to some aspects of occupational pension schemes. As a result, we are unable to uprate those benefits without creating unintended consequences for occupational pension schemes. In the circumstances, we plan to hold state additional pension flat in cash terms this year. However, the 2.5 per cent increase in the basic state pension will mean that, on average, pensioners in Great Britain will see an overall increase of 2 per cent in their state pension.

For the poorest pensioners, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor also confirmed that the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit will rise from next April by £2.60 a week for single pensioners and £3.95 for couples. That means that, from April next year, no single pensioner need live on less than £132.60 a week, and no couple on less than £202.40 a week. That represents a real-terms increase of more than a third for the poorest pensioners since 1997. The above-earnings increase in the pension credit guarantee underlines the Government's ongoing commitment to tackling pensioner poverty, which has already ensured that there are 900,000 fewer pensioners in relative poverty today than there were in 1998-99. In fact, the Government have spent around £100 billion more on pensioners since 1997 than we would have done if we had simply allowed the policies of the previous Government to continue.

We have taken action, and we will continue to take action to ensure that people do not have to face the recession alone—abandoned, as happened so often in the past. We have learned the lessons from the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, which is why our upcoming White Paper will set out the next steps in our continuing determination to invest in people and give them the help they need because, for this Government, unemployment will never be a price worth paying.

The package of uprating proposals, which is worth around £2 billion for 2010-11, represents significant and worthwhile help for those who are among the poorest and most vulnerable in society. It provides real help in a challenging year, and I commend the statement to the House.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. This recession has hit families hard throughout the country, and, as we heard yesterday, low and middle earners, particularly those earning £20,000 and above, will pay the price for the Government's fiscal irresponsibility.

The Minister's statement comes at a time of great challenges. Unemployment has reached 2.5 million, with youth unemployment being higher before the recession than when the Government came to power. There are 2.5 million pensioners living in poverty, and the rate of child poverty has increased by 400,000 since 2004. We welcome any action that provides greater support to the innocent victims of Labour's failure to tackle poverty, but does the Minister agree that it is completely unacceptable and deeply cynical for the Government to increase benefit levels before an election, only to cut them after an election? That is exactly what they appear to be doing.

The Government are committed to a 1.5 per cent. rise in child benefit, disability living allowance, carer's allowance and incapacity benefit, but they have no funding to continue the measure after the election. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has made it clear that

"the Chancellor committed himself—or rather, his successor—to increase those same benefits by 1.5 per cent. less than inflation this time next year";

and the pre-Budget report confirms that the policy

"avoids a further permanent increase in expenditure".

It is a pre-election con, paid for by a real-terms cut in benefits following the election. Does the Minister understand that such sleight of hand is exactly what we have come to expect from her Government and one reason why so many hold politics in such low esteem? Will she also confirm that this year there is no £60 Christmas bonus, which many pensioners valued this time last year, and explain the reason for its absence?

We welcome the increase in the basic state pension, which will be a relief to pensioners who have seen their savings hit by low interest rates. Will the Minister confirm when the Government plan to restore the earnings link for the basic state pension and will she explain how the Government plan to pay for it, having set their face against a state pension age increase that would save £13 billion a year?

There was a hidden threat to pensions in yesterday's pre-Budget report. The Chancellor's opaque reference to

"phasing in the roll-out of pension personal accounts" [*Official Report*, 9 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 369.]

appears to herald yet another delay in the Government's flagship personal accounts scheme. Will the Minister confirm that personal accounts will not be fully up and running with 3 per cent. employer contributions until 2017? It is not high earners who will lose out from the delay, but people on middle and low incomes, because it potentially leaves millions of people facing a gap in contributions that they might never take up.

The measure will not only fail to improve the levels of saving, it could actually reduce saving rates at the very time that we need them to increase. The Association of British Insurers said:

"This money will be saved at the expense of getting the low-paid into long-term pension saving, which is absolutely vital for their future welfare in retirement."

Will the Minister confirm that the PBR has taken £2.4 billion out of the pensions of people on low and middle incomes? I also note that the Government are not uprating state additional pensions. Will the Minister tell us how many pensioners are going to lose out as a result?

On disability benefits, following the Opposition day debate on Tuesday, I note that there is still concern about the threat that the Government's care reforms pose to disabled pensioners. All the preferred funding models in the Government's Green Paper are underpinned by the integration of attendance allowance and disability

[Andrew Selous]

living allowance for the over-65s with a future care and support system. In effect, those cash benefits, which are currently paid directly to recipients for them to use as they wish, would be integrated into local authority social care budgets, and that would give older disabled people less control and less independence.

On Tuesday the Government were making up policy on the hoof without providing any details. They now have to answer a series of serious questions about how the new policy will work in practice. Will people entering a new scheme with equivalent needs to people currently receiving disability living allowance or attendance allowance get the same entitlement? Finally, will the Minister confirm that the Government are cutting £130 million from the national health service budget as a result of the rise in employer's national insurance which was announced yesterday?

Angela Eagle: I was going to thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the £2 billion of extra resources that, even in difficult times, this Government have managed to find for those who are poor and vulnerable. However, I did not hear any welcome at all in his remarks. He talked about the increase of 1.5 per cent. in disability and carer's benefits, but it would have been a zero-rate increase if we had not brought it forward as the Chancellor announced yesterday. That is not a cut in benefit; it is a 1.5 per cent. increase in benefit this year, over and above the current rate of RPI minus 1.4 per cent. Does he welcome that? He did not say whether he welcomed the fact that those who rely on disability and carer's benefits will have an increase this year instead of a freeze.

On the earnings link for the basic state pension, the hon. Gentleman knows that Parliament has already legislated to restore the link from 2012, or by 2015—the end of the next Parliament—at the latest.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): Who abolished it?

Angela Eagle: Obviously the Conservatives abolished it in the 1980s. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Front Benchers say that we have done nothing about the earnings link for the basic state pension while we have been in power, but we have raised the basic state pension above prices every year since 1998-99. Every year we have seen a real increase above RPI; in 18 years, the Conservatives increased it once, and they did so to compensate for the introduction of VAT on fuel. We have a far greater record of which to be proud than the Opposition.

I can confirm that the personal accounts reform programme will begin in 2012 as planned, but there will be a slowing of implementation to enable us to ensure that this very complicated and large programme can be put into effect appropriately.

On additional pensions, the hon. Gentleman asked why there is no increase this year, and that is because of the feed-through to those private sector pensions that are contracted out. Such a measure would be extremely complicated, and there would then be an increasing difference between public sector pensions, which would get the increase, and private sector pensions, which are often linked to RPI increases and have planned for a zero-rate increase. We felt that that situation would not be desirable, but I emphasise that all pensioners will see a real-terms increase because of the 2.5 per cent. increase that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in his pre-Budget report yesterday.

The Opposition have spent the past few months telling us that in the depths of a recession we should cut public expenditure. They voted against the fiscal stimulus and the extra help from the Department for Work and Pensions for those in the real economy who have to deal with the effects of the recession, and for those who have been unemployed. Indeed, the Opposition continue to say that they would cut the deficit further and faster, but I still do not know, and I have not heard from the hon. Gentleman, whether they support the uprating—whether they support the £2 billion of extra money that we have been able to allocate for the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. I note with interest that he gave us no indication of whether the Opposition support today's statement.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of the statement. May I offer her my commiserations? When there is good news, the Secretary of State comes to the House to make the statement; when it is bad news, the Minister of State does so. I therefore thank her for coming to the House with this statement. However, we had hoped that it would provide us with the bits that the Chancellor forgot yesterday. When we saw a copy of it a few moments ago, we anticipated the Minister explaining that April's rise in child benefit and disabled people's benefit was temporary, and that when the 2011 increase comes about it will be as if the 2010 increase had never happened. Mysteriously, she forgot that as well. I wonder whether her Department actually knew, or knows, about this; when we read the small print of the pre-Budget report last night, we spotted the problem and I challenged the Minister's ministerial colleague, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), about it in the Chamber. I asked whether there would be real-terms cuts in 2011, to which the hon. Lady replied:

"I do not think that there will be a real-terms cut"—*[Official Report*, 9 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 424.]

Will this Minister clarify whether the Department was told about the issue in advance, and indeed whether it knows now, that what it proposes is a real-terms increase before the election and a real-terms cut after the election? Is that not a definition of cynicism?

The Minister mentioned additional pension and the state earnings-related pension scheme, or SERPS. Surely the Government could have indexed SERPS if they had wanted to; pensioners who heard that they were getting 2.5 per cent. would hardly have thought that the Government were picking and choosing which bits of their pensions to index and which bits not to. Can the Minister confirm that next year SERPS will be indexed fully in line with the RPI, and not clawed back as child benefit and disability living allowance have been? Can she also confirm that more than 10 million families and disabled people will, as the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, be subject to a real-terms cut—by definition—between 2010 and 2011, because whatever the inflation rate in September 2010, the Government will put less than that on the benefit rates for 2010? That is a real cut; it must be. Will she confirm that?

Among the additional pension components is the graduated retirement benefit. That is not subject to contracting-out issues, so will the Minister confirm that she will index that benefit, which many older pensioners receive? I am sure that she will, because there is no reason not to.

Had we had a real-terms increase in 2010 for disabled people and families that was a permanent feature of the system, we would have welcomed it unreservedly. As it is, it is a temporary, pre-election feature of the system. It should have been made permanent. We all hoped that the statement today would make that clear; it is almost as if the Government are embarrassed about what they have done.

Angela Eagle: I am not embarrassed about a statement on uprating that, at a time of economic challenge and difficulty, puts £2 billion of extra resources into the pockets of people who are often the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman could think that I would be.

The rise in retail prices-indexed benefits is not temporary, but real. It is happening in April next year instead of a zero increase. I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would welcome the fact that we have been able to get extra resources now into the pockets of those on child benefit, disability allowance and incapacity benefit, rather than inflicting on them the zero increase that the RPI benefits would have left them with. We are helping 5.5 million people, and I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would welcome that.

I confirm that we will increase SERPS indexation in line with the RPI; the question was simply whether we could, in the short space of time, give assistance with additional pension in that way. There would have been a difficulty with uprating the additional pension rather than holding it flat this year; it would have meant that the public sector would have got the increase, but that those responsible for private sector pensions, which are connected to this, would all have been planning for a zero-rate increase and would not have been able to increase their pensions in line with the increases we announced in the time available. We therefore felt that it would be better to do it in a more orderly way and keep additional pensions at zero for now. That does not mean that an increase connected to RPI will not come through in due course.

Mr. Winnick: As someone who occasionally criticises the Government, I should say to my hon. Friend that one of the most impressive achievements of the Labour Government since 1997 has been to undermine pensioner poverty substantially. We should also bear in mind the winter fuel allowance, which was introduced almost from the moment at which Labour was elected. That compares well with the disgraceful poverty that pensioners had to face year after year during the last Tory Government.

Angela Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I am certainly very proud to be part of a Government who are the first in our history to break the link between old age and poverty. People over 65 are now no more likely to face poverty than any other generation or age cohort in our society. That is a substantial achievement. I am also proud that instead of spending a mere £60 million on helping pensioners with their fuel bills—the situation we inherited in 1997—we now spend £2.7 billion a year on that, because of the introduction of the winter fuel payment.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): May I direct the Minister's attention to the group of pensioners who were very responsible during their working lives and established a quality and way of life funded not only by benefits or the state pension but by the savings they had made? Their quality of life has now been dreadfully undermined, because the rate of interest on savings has plummeted to almost zero. Are the Government and the Minister concerned about that group of people, who were highly responsible during their working lives but are now suffering? They cannot benefit from the announcements—announcements that I welcome—from the Minister this afternoon.

Angela Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the announcements, which is more than his party's Front-Bench spokesman did. The historically low interest paid at the moment, because of the economic situation we find ourselves in and the world finds itself in, has caused particular issues for those who rely on interest from savings in their retirement. We do our best to assist them—particularly, for example, by increasing the personal allowance thresholds, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor did in his Budget last year. That lifted another 600,000 pensioners out of tax altogether, and 60 per cent. of pensioners now pay no tax.

Although we are concerned about pensioners who rely on savings income, I should also say that 55 per cent. of pensioners receive less than £10 a week, or no income at all, from investments. In essence, today's statement is more about them, as the hon. Gentleman himself acknowledged.

John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab): I warmly welcome this statement on benefits uprating; it is proof today that the Government have not abandoned the poor and vulnerable. I particularly welcome the uprating on state pensions. Some of us will recall Mrs. Thatcher's being handbagged because of the Conservative Government's disgraceful record for cutting pensions rather than upgrading them. Will my hon. Friend confirm that some analysts in the media are suggesting today that, when we take account of the RPI and inflation trends, the increase may be worth about 4 per cent. in real terms? Will she also confirm that the Government have done more to bring pensioners and retired people out of poverty than any Government since the introduction of the welfare state? A Tory Budget—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. This is becoming a speech.

Angela Eagle: I share my right hon. Friend's passion for the results of our work on eliminating pensioner poverty. Pensioners are now no more likely to be poor than other age cohorts in our society. There is still more to do, which is why we continue to work to improve access to pension credit, to assist those who are still on low incomes.

I can confirm that, with the RPI at minus 1.4 per cent., the 2.5 per cent. increase is closer to 4 per cent. If he had chosen to, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor could have frozen the basic state pension; instead, he chose to increase it by 2.5 per cent.—and that is closer to a 4 per cent. increase, as my right hon. Friend the

[Angela Eagle]

Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) said. I know that across the country many of the spokespeople for our 11 million pensioners welcomed the announcement when they heard it in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's statement yesterday.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): Earlier, during business questions, I asked about the level of winter fuel payments and was told to await this benefits uprating statement, but unfortunately there is nothing in it about that issue. I welcome the Government's introduction of winter fuel payments and the increase in the basic state pension that has been announced. However, is there not a need for regular reviews on increases in winter fuel payments? Also, what about the £60 Christmas bonus for pensioners this year?

Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor always keeps in view the level of the winter fuel payment, which the Conservatives have called a gimmick but is £2.7 billion of real help that ensures that when the weather gets cold, pensioners do not have to worry about turning their heating up. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's view on that. On uprating, my right hon. Friend keeps that under review. When the winter fuel payment was first introduced it was £20; this year, it is between £250 and £400 for all people over state retirement age—substantial and real help for those who wonder whether they can get through the winter and worry about turning their heating up. There is no need for them do that because of the winter fuel payment, which should be arriving even as we speak.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that in previous recessions stretching back to the '70s, on every single occasion the people at the bottom of the pile have come off worse? This is the first time that those least able to weather the storm have come off better than many others, including—dare I say it?—some bankers who could have been hit even harder. Can I suggest to my hon. Friend that this is an example of fixing the roof even when it is raining for those least able to bear it?

Angela Eagle: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend's comments. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor was very clear in his approach to the pre-Budget report, of which this uprating statement is a very important part. He believes that those with the broadest shoulders should bear the greatest burden of the challenges that face us in the economy at the moment. This uprating statement proves that he has delivered that in action.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister take steps to end the scandal whereby British taxpayers are funding the now uprated child benefit payments to EU nationals who live in this country but whose children reside in their country of origin?

Angela Eagle: We keep these things under review. However, we are bound by EU reciprocal laws on social security that enable the 1.5 million UK citizens who live and work in the European Union to benefit in turn from local arrangements in the countries in which they work.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) (Lab): We all appreciate what the Government have done over the past 10 or 12 years in general terms in increasing benefits across the board. Having said that, coming back to the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds), can my hon. Friend reassure me that she will keep the winter fuel allowance under review, bearing it in mind that oil prices and so on are starting to creep up?

Angela Eagle: I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is committed to keeping the winter fuel payment as the helpful benefit that it is. Its size has gone up consistently since it was introduced, and we now spend £2.7 billion a year on ensuring that older people need not worry about keeping warm in winter.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister has a reputation for not trying to dodge a question and giving an honest answer. Will she therefore explain to the House whether, given that when we get to 2011 this year's 1.5 per cent. increase is going to be disregarded, that means there will be a real cut of 1.5 per cent.? Could she be absolutely clear about that?

Angela Eagle: Flattery will get the hon. Gentleman to all sorts of places; I welcome his comment about my answering straight questions. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has taken action to ensure that 1.5 per cent. of money can be given to those on carers' benefits, who otherwise, without the action he has taken, would have been facing a zero increase in today's uprating statement. That assists 5.5 million people. This morning, when asked about what would happen in 2011, he said that we will have to decide in 12 months' time what will happen for the next year. The hon. Gentleman knows that benefit upratings are held only on an annual basis, so we cannot speculate from this far away when we do not know what the rate of inflation will be and what the implications for uprating will be in 2011.

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): Obviously, 1.5 per cent. is more welcome than zero per cent., but for the carer's allowance, which is particularly low, it is not very much. Can the Minister see a way towards pulling carers allowance up?

Angela Eagle: We can have some interesting debates about the interaction of benefits, but today we are talking about their uprating rather than changing their balance in the benefits system. We all know from our own constituency case loads of the crucially important work that carers do. That is why I am pleased to be at the Department for Work and Pensions when we are bringing in the historic changes that, from April next year, will credit carers into access to the basic state pension for their caring responsibilities. For the first time, it will be possible for someone who has cared for 30 years to get the credits to qualify in full for the basic state pension. I am very proud of that change, which this Government have managed to bring in.

Points of Order

12.46 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In response to a freedom of information request for papers relating to Cabinet Committees dealing with devolution to Scotland and Wales, the Information Commissioner determined that those papers should be released. Today, Sir, the Lord Chancellor has laid a written ministerial statement indicating that he has used the veto that Ministers possess to prevent the release of those papers. In nine years, that veto was not used; it has now been used twice in one year. In this instance, it has been used before the matter has gone to an information tribunal, and the Lord Chancellor has not, as he did previously, come to the House to explain his decision in an oral statement.

I understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Information Commissioner is likely to undertake a special report to Parliament. May I seek your guidance—perhaps if you cannot give immediate guidance, you might ask Mr. Speaker—as to how this special report, which is obviously of crucial importance, can be placed before the House for debate, because it is clearly inappropriate that such a report, which criticises the action of a Cabinet Minister, should be in the hands of the same Cabinet Minister in determining whether it should be placed before the House?

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The papers referred to, which date from 1997, relate to devolution to Scotland and Wales, and also to the English regions. I have in my hand a certificate that the Secretary of State placed in the Journal Office today in which he takes the view that the public interest favours the continued non-disclosure of all the information concerned. Bearing that in mind, could we, as my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) requested, have some clarification as to the procedure for ensuring that any report that the Information Commissioner makes is not withheld by the Secretary of State but is made available to the House, because so far it does not appear to be accessible?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I have no prior knowledge of the point that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) have raised. Clearly, it is a very serious matter. It is not something that I can rule on now, but the House has certainly heard what they said, and it is clearly on the record. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench, and Mr. Speaker too, will want to look at the matter very carefully and decide precisely what course of action to take.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Have you heard whether there is to be a Statutory Instrument Committee meeting today to scrutinise the Flood Risk Regulations 2009, which are due to come into force today? Is it the Government's wish for us to scrutinise them in the normal way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have to say the same thing to the hon. Lady. I have no knowledge that any statement of that kind will be made today, but again, the point that she has made is firmly on the record and I am sure that those responsible for these matters will take note of it.

Miss McIntosh: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you give me guidance on what the legal position is if a statutory instrument is not properly laid before Parliament, has not been properly consulted on with outside bodies and has not been properly scrutinised by both Houses of Parliament? Is that legal? Can such an instrument come into effect?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think the hon. Lady is tempting me into all sorts of hypotheticals that I would be well advised to avoid. She has made the point, and as I said, I am sure that those who respond to these matters will look at it.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Concern has been expressed in various quarters of the House today and earlier about the treatment of private Members' Bills and the time available for them to be discussed and processed in this Session. Can you do anything to ensure that they are properly debated and that proper time will be made available to deal with them?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I understand that the Leader of the House is looking very carefully at that situation to see precisely how it can be resolved. It is a very important matter, and it needs to be cleared up without delay.

Estimates Day

[1st Allotted Day]

VOTE ON ACCOUNT, 2010-11

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Students and Universities

[Relevant Documents: The Eleventh Report from the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, HC 170, Session 2008-09, on Students and universities, and the Government's response, HC 991.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

(1) resources, not exceeding £9,653,466,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £11,071,732,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out. *(Mr Heppell.)*

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD) *rise*

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con) *rise*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I call Mr. Phil Willis.

12.51 pm

Mr. Willis: What an august start to a debate—I am very grateful to you for making the historic decision to call me, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I welcome this estimates debate on the report on students and universities that the then Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills published on 2 August. Although I recognise that many Members may wish to broaden the issue, I wish to keep my remarks to the report.

Far too often, the work of our universities is discussed in isolation from the very people who are the principal recipients, the students themselves. We often talk about research, institutions and organisations without mentioning the students, yet the quality of the experience that they get often not only determines their life chances but is critical to our nation's future. At this time, it behoves all political parties to take the issue of quality and standards in our universities to heart.

The taxpayer contributes something in the region of £15 billion to our universities, and there are currently about 2.3 million students of different sorts in them. They make a significant contribution too, through the money that they pay universities. The question that my Committee asked was whether the taxpayer and the students got good value for money and whether it was a quality product. We strongly welcomed the initiative by the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), when he was Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, of posing the question, "What do we want the higher education system to look like in 15 years' time?" That was exactly the right question, and I compliment him for beginning that debate.

I wish to put on record that over the past 10 years, the higher education system has received a significant investment of resources, both in revenue and particularly capital. On the matter that the Select Committee on Science and Technology, as it now is, is particularly interested in, there has been huge investment in laboratory infrastructure and so on. I have started on a positive note, and I hope that the Minister has noted it.

We considered whether the student experience is truly world-class, as it is often portrayed. Although fees and funding frequently came into our deliberations, they were not part of our brief, so I shall not comment on variable fees. The Committee looks forward to the report of the review by Lord Browne of Madingley, which should inform the debate after the general election.

I pay tribute to the four members of the Select Committee who are present for the debate. I have to say that our inquiry and our final report have not been without controversy, and it is fair to say that our mailbag was not only large but contained extremely diverse responses to our recommendations. That is exactly what a Select Committee report should do—it should be able to create debate and, to some extent, controversy. I thank all those who contributed to the report, including vice-chancellors, academics and representatives of professional bodies. In particular, I wish to single out students. We met a great number who were an absolute pleasure to deal with, and I wish to put on record our appreciation to the National Union of Students, which constantly provided the Committee with high-quality evidence and was prepared to take on board a number of the criticisms that we made.

The Committee actively sought out innovative ways to engage with students. We visited universities, and at Oxford we even had the equivalent of a speed-dating session, at which we spoke to a number of students in different formats. We also held a major consultation for three months as part and parcel of our work. We were rigorous in taking evidence, but it was controversial. I therefore wish initially to remove some misunderstandings.

We had no intention of undermining what I and my Committee believe to be a world-class higher education system. Our criticisms are to try to improve it rather than undermine it. Given the rapid changes in the sector, which are likely to accelerate in future months and years, we wanted to add to the debate about the future of the sector. We were therefore somewhat surprised by the reaction of the Government and the higher education sector to our report. When it was published last August Lord Mandelson, the Business Secretary, was quoted in the press as saying that he did not "recognise the committee's description" of universities. The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, who is in his place, was equally scathing about the fact that we had produced a report during the summer recess, which I found quite strange.

The Government echoed that line in their response to the report, stating at paragraph 1:

"We believe that the picture of our higher education system which emerged in the report was far less positive than is in fact the case."

Universities UK was equally hostile to the report. Indeed, many parts of the higher education establishment appeared largely defensive and reluctant to engage in many of the issues. They gave the impression that Parliament somehow had no right to interfere in the product being delivered,

and that we should just let them get on with it. Given the fact that we have put in £15 billion of taxpayers' money, that attitude is frankly unacceptable.

Over the past few months the Government and the higher education sector, having dismissed many of our concerns, have quietly been getting on with implementing most of the key recommendations in the report. Perhaps that is the way things are and how the system works. I hope that the Minister will explain why there has been a change of heart—perhaps the Government were planning it in the first place. *[Interruption.]* I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) does not have swine flu just before Christmas.

I wish to deal with four matters, the first of which is the information available to prospective students, which is absolutely essential if they are to make informed choices about institutions and courses of study. We found that although universities' prospectuses competed on their public relations appeal, they did not present information in a consistent format to allow easy comparison. We concluded that the sector should develop a code of practice on information for prospective students, which should cover the time a typical undergraduate student should expect to spend attending lectures and tutorials, in personal study and, for science courses, in laboratories during a week, and a clear indication of who would be teaching them.

The need for that information was brought home to us by a mature student doing a nursing degree, who pointed out:

"Getting a clear idea of the hours involved and when lectures would be was incredibly important to me because of child care."

The sector has seen a huge growth in the number of mature students—post 21-year-olds—and part-time students, and those who study specific modules at a variety of different sites, and they need to be able to plan with certainty.

We did not recommend the standardisation of either courses or curricula. To do so would be to undermine university autonomy and academic freedom, and the core strength of our university system. To be fair, the Government responded fairly positively and agreed that it would be helpful for prospective students to have access to information concerning work loads. They have asked the Higher Education Funding Council England to examine the issues, in consultation with the sector.

By contrast, Universities UK appeared to see little need for change, stating:

"Universities have already put significant resource into publishing information for prospective students".

That is true, but they said that the problem was students' failure to navigate the information that was already there. We were therefore pleasantly surprised to see in HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance report, which was published in October this year, that its teaching, quality and student experience sub-committee considered that:

"Institutions also clearly need to provide information in an appropriate common format. This should cover the nature and amount of staff contact that students may expect, the nature of the learning effort expected, the time this will take, and the academic support likely to be available."

That is exactly what we had recommended in the report that was dismissed, so ha'lelujah! The Government, in their plan for the future of higher education, "Higher Ambitions", which was published in November, on which I compliment the Minister, state:

"It is...important to ensure that potential students have the best possible information on the content of courses".

We warmly welcome that.

The second area our report covers is the treatment of part-time and mature students. The failure of the current system to treat part-time students on the same basis as full-time students is, in effect, a form of discrimination. That is not only wrong, but it hinders the achievement of the Government's objective of 40 per cent. of all adults in England gaining a higher education qualification by 2020.

Although we did not take extensive evidence from part-time students, there was a strong feeling that although some universities actively welcome them and make appropriate curriculum provisions, many do not. In the latter, students have to take what are effectively full-time courses in part, rather than appropriately designed modules.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): Is not the real issue that as each year goes by, the distinction between full-time and part-time courses in terms of hours taught becomes increasingly irrelevant? In many universities and for many courses, it would be very difficult to distinguish clearly between a student attending a part-time course and a student attending full time? Many students on full-time courses will attend for fewer hours than students notionally on part-time courses.

Mr. Willis: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why it is it is absolutely imperative for the review that is taking place to look at how we deliver higher education in totality and does not simply say, "Some students work part time and some work full time." We certainly need to consider that. I hope the Minister will tell us in his winding-up speech that that, and not simply funding, will be addressed in the review.

We were disappointed that Universities UK did not address the matter in its response. To go back to what the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said, one area we looked at in the inquiry was the delivery of modularised curricula, which means people can dip in and out over a longer period, accumulate credits and transfer them between universities. There were some very hostile reactions, particular from some in the Russell group of universities, which frankly did not participate in that more universal response.

We were pleased, however, that in "Higher Ambitions", the Government stated:

"In order to attract a greater diversity of students, more part time study, more vocationally-based foundation degrees, more work-based study...and more study whilst living at home must be made available."

I think we are making progress—I put that on the record in a spirit of co-operation.

The quality of teaching should be a core aspect of the undergraduate experience. It did not surprise us that the views of the students to whom we spoke ran the full gamut between complimentary and downright critical, but we were stunned by one constant criticism that came up time after time. One student said that

"university lecturers seriously need to take lessons from school teachers on how to teach. They are clever"

that is a compliment

"but they are not skilled at conveying the message."

[Mr. Willis]

That is quite a powerful thing to say. It would clearly be inappropriate to have an Ofsted-type approach to teaching quality in universities—I fully accept that and we do not recommend such an approach—but it is important that the Government and the higher education sector draw up and implement arrangements applicable across the sector that would allow students to convey concerns about poor teaching, and ensure that universities take quick remedial action. We should empower students in that way. The Government should require universities, as a condition of support from the taxpayer, to have in place programmes to improve teaching quality and the effectiveness of all academic staff—I do not think that that would interfere with their autonomy—and there should be a review of the common practice in universities of using graduate students to teach, albeit in view of the main academic staff. That concern, which was raised by many students, clearly needs to be addressed.

The Government's initial response was lukewarm, but it is fair to say that successive Higher Education Ministers have pressed universities on that issue and made money available to improve teaching. Although the Government said that they believe

"it is right that higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring their staff hold appropriate qualifications"

the Minister has asked HEFCE to explore with the sector whether institutions' human resources strategies provide adequate information about their approach to staff professional development—we feel that the Minister needs to take the issue of improving teaching quality seriously.

Mr. Andrew Smith (Oxford, East) (Lab): I value the work that the hon. Gentleman and his Committee did on the report. On his point about the involvement of graduate students in teaching or in support of the teaching effort, and linking it to what he is saying about professional development, is there a case for recognising the role that graduate and research students can play, and for actually structuring appropriate training and support, so that the quality of their teaching helps to raise the general standards?

Mr. Willis: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Committee certainly did not say that we should not have graduate students teaching; we said that they should be properly trained. Quite often, their experience is nearer to that of the students', and they can therefore have a much close interrelation. However, the idea that a person can suddenly teach at graduate level just because they have completed their degree is stretching things.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): On my hon. Friend's response to the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), we also need to recognise that part of the problem is that many graduate students are told to teach, and they are expected to do so, perhaps while their supervisor is on sabbatical. They are not properly remunerated for it, which is bad for the person taught as well as for the graduate student.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The reality is that we need to get a grip of the issue. We must not have teaching on the cheap. We would not get high-quality research on the cheap and we expect people to deliver those programmes, and that should apply to teaching.

It was disappointing that Universities UK accepted none of the criticisms on teaching in universities. It said in its response:

"In our experience, criticism of the quality of teaching and standards tends to be isolated and anecdotal, and not borne out by larger scale surveys such as the National Student Survey or the CBI survey of employers...nor the national data on complaints."

None of those surveys asked those specific questions, so they did not get the answer. However, I am grateful to the Minister for recognising that the quality of teaching is important and that we need to do something about it.

The final area I wish to examine is standards. That issue has generated much heat in the media, though not as much light as I would have liked. In my view, a key role of a Select Committee carrying out an inquiry is to test the orthodoxies—a thankless task, but essential. The orthodoxies on standards in higher education as we perceived them are, first, that the UK's international reputation is of strategic importance, and I think that we would agree with that. Secondly, universities themselves have the responsibility for maintaining the standards of their awards—again, we agree. Thirdly, maintenance of standards is integral to universities' autonomy and that autonomy is the keystone of the sector. Fourthly, all universities have systems in place to ensure that courses are regularly reviewed and, fifthly, the Quality Assurance Agency conducts regular visits to universities to scrutinise how they maintain standards. Who could disagree? The system should therefore be perfect. However, what we found when we challenged those orthodoxies was a somewhat uncomfortable truth.

We found that the system in England for safeguarding consistent national degree standards in higher education institutions is out of date, inadequate and in urgent need of replacement. With even the head of QAA describing the degree classification as "rotten" and "not fit for purpose", the issue needs to be taken seriously. The current arrangements with each university responsible for its own standards are perhaps no longer meeting the needs of a mass system of higher education in the 21st century with 133 higher education institutions and more than 2 million students.

One statistic sticks out like a sore thumb. The proportion of first class and upper second class honours degrees has steadily increased over the past 15 years, with the proportion of students achieving first class honours rising from 7.7 per cent. in 1996-97 to 13.3 per cent. in 2007-08. There may be good reasons for that, such as better teaching, harder-working students or a metamorphosis in students' ability. However, there may be perverse reasons, such as universities inflating marks to keep their positions in the league tables. I hope that it is the former, not the latter. The short answer is that we do not know. That is the uncomfortable truth. Nor is there any appetite whatsoever to investigate the reasons for that significant degree inflation objectively.

When we asked Universities UK about the increase in the number of first class honours, the answers we got would shame a first year student in statistics:

"Universities UK acknowledged that there had been 'a lot of talk and publicity on this in the last six months or so, about degree classification', but told us that 'the patterns of degree classification have not changed all that much over the last ten years—only a six per cent rise in the percentage of Firsts and 2.1s'".

Ministers appeared to take at face value explanations about grade inflation without detailed analysis. In fact the figures showed a steady increase in the proportion of first degree students achieving first class honours—an increase over the period of 72 per cent. That needs explaining, but rather than engage with the issue, it seems that everyone prefers to look the other way and hope for the best. Why? The defence is always university autonomy. I am talking here about institutional autonomy, not academic freedom.

The Committee rightly dared to question the institutional autonomy of universities to set and maintain their own standards, not because we wanted to lead an onslaught on the autonomy of higher education, but because we found evidence that autonomy was, if anything, obscuring, if not undermining, quality and standards. As a Committee, we would defend vigorously the right of universities to maintain autonomy from the state and be the custodians of academic freedom. That is the unique strength of our university system and why it is admired around the world. But in return, universities must be able to provide clear, peer-reviewed evidence that they are the true custodians of standards too. They cannot have it just one way.

How we compare academic standards across different institutions is not easy, but simply to ignore the challenge is unacceptable. The evidence we received on assessment methodologies gave us serious grounds for concern. One witness told us that there is

"considerable variation across the higher education sector in assessment practices. Whilst this can be seen as a consequence of institutional autonomy, the rationales for the various institutional choices that have been made are unclear".

We established that quite small variations in the way in which degree classifications are determined can have more effect on the classification of some students than was generally realised. One academic told us that

"my university runs what has been described as a very perverse model for classifying degree schemes. What happens is that low marks between 0 and 20 are rounded up to 20 and high marks from 80 to 100 are rounded downwards, and then they are averaged together, so you have this non-linear average before making a classification."

If that is the basis on which we award degrees, something is wrong. There needs to be transparency and if the price of higher education organisational autonomy is a lack of transparency and inconsistent standards, we have to ask whether it is worth it.

Two pieces of evidence that we took from students and during the inquiry gave us real concern. First, different levels of effort were required in different universities to obtain degrees in similar subjects, which might suggest that different standards may be applied. Secondly, we came across some pointers that students in England spend significantly less time studying, including lectures, contact time with academic staff and private study, than their counterparts overseas. Our visit to the US confirmed that. We made no conclusion about these variations other than to ask that more research be done to examine whether these factors affect quality. That is not an unreasonable thing to ask. Sadly the Government said that they were

"not convinced of the usefulness of further...research"

The only answer we were given by vice-chancellors, whose overseas market might be affected by declining quality, was that as international students continue to apply to our universities standards must be satisfactory. As we say in the report, we consider that it is

"absurd and disreputable to justify academic standards with a market mechanism".

Of course, the defence of standards by both the Government and sector was the existence of the Quality Assurance Agency. But we found that the QAA focuses almost exclusively on processes, not standards. That is why we called for the QAA to be transformed into an independent quality and standards agency with a remit to safeguard, monitor and report on standards. We did not seek some standardised format that could mechanistically be monitored by an Ofsted-type organisation. Instead, a quality and standards agency would take up the challenge of maintaining standards across the sector rather than simply within individual institutions.

In reply the Government said:

"The Quality Assurance Agency...does a good job but needs to take on a more public-facing role and one which allows any concerns about quality or standards to be investigated quickly, transparently and robustly."

That misses the point. It is not better public relations that are required for the QAA, but a better examination of standards.

In a discussion only two weeks ago, I was intrigued to hear the new chairman of the QAA, Anthony McClaran, outline a proposed consultation on key principles and processes for a revised quality assurance system. He said that the purpose would be to provide authoritative, publicly accessible information on academic quality and standards in higher education; to command public, employer and other stakeholder confidence; to meet the needs of funders and of autonomous institutions; to meet the needs of students; and to reply on independent judgment. Hallelujah! That is exactly what we have called for. Quite frankly, I am not bothered whether it is called the quality and standards agency or the QAA, providing those issues are addressed.

That was a useful exercise for the Committee to undertake and it pointed out several issues that need further discussion. The Committee recognised the strength of our higher education system and that to meet the needs of a 21st century, post-recession economy, the system has to work harder, better and to a higher standard than ever before. We have to compete with a US system and an Administration that has just put nearly an extra $1 trillion into higher education, and with China and India, which are putting untold wealth into producing not just widgets, but the highest intellectual quality. That is why we did the report and why we recommended it to the Minister. In that spirit, I hope that he will respond in an appropriately supportive way.

1.20 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee not only for the report before us today, but for the report by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, which he also chaired. There is no doubt that his Committee has a good reputation for holding Government to account. That is what Select Committees are about. He said that some Members might wish to go broader than his report, which I have read, and I intend to do so.

[Mr. Eric Martlew]

The thing about students and universities is that people need a university before they can discuss them. It is not a packed Chamber today, is it? However, the two hon. Members for Oxford constituencies—the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith)—are present. That says something about the fact that Oxford university is probably the most famous university in the world and has done tremendous things not only for Britain, but the world.

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am grateful—as too, I am sure, will be the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris)—for my hon. Friend's recognition of Oxford. However, my hon. Friend must remember, when talking about universities and Oxford, to mention both of them—Oxford university, and Oxford Brookes university and its excellent work.

Mr. Martlew: But I shall try not to mention Oxford United.

I was elected MP for Carlisle in 1987. As a Cumbrian MP, I was faced with a particular challenge. More than 300 years ago, the area's application for a university was turned down because of our warlike neighbours, the Scots; it was thought inappropriate to have a university so close to the Scottish border, so it was put in Durham. People in Cumbria long took it for granted that they would not get a university, as a result of which so few of our young people actually went to university, and many of those who did, such as Lord Bragg of Wigton, Hunter Davies, Margaret Foster and Sir Brian Fender, the great educationist, did not return for many years. That meant the area was being drained of its talent, which we needed to bring prosperity.

Soon after I was selected as a candidate, I went to a lecture by the vice-chancellor of Preston polytechnic, as it was then—it is now the university of Central Lancashire. He said that north Cumbria and south-west Scotland were the most deprived areas in western Europe in terms of higher education provision. When I was elected, therefore, one of the first things that I knew that we needed to do was to provide local people with the opportunity to study for a degree without having to leave home and to encourage others to study there.

I am grateful to a good friend of mine, the noble Lord Glenamara, who was then chancellor of the university of Northumbria. Ted Short, as he was called when a Member of this House, was the Education Secretary who took the decision to locate the university in the north of England in Lancaster, not in Carlisle. As a Cumbrian, he always regretted having to do that, but I think that it was the fault of the local authority.

I worked well with Lord Glenamara, and in 1992, we opened—he kindly asked me to open it with him—the Carlisle campus of the university of Northumbria in the historic quarter next to the cathedral. That was the first time people from my area and north Cumbria could get a degree in their own constituency. And it made a difference. I remember meeting a young girl who must have been in her mid-20s with a child of about eight—obviously, she had a baby very young—who was attending the university. She had a child to look after and was thrilled that she could do a degree and become a teacher. There was great satisfaction in that example.

When Labour came to power, my area got a brand-new hospital—the first private finance initiative hospital to be built in this country. However, the old district general hospital, which was a listed building, had no use. That could have been a disaster, because listed buildings with no use are, in many ways, a menace, as I know well. However, St. Martin's college—one of the finest teacher-training colleges in Britain—which was looking to expand out of Lancaster, took over the old hospital. It is now a teacher-training section of the university of Cumbria.

We had the critical mass of facilities needed to build the university of Cumbria. My noble Friend Lord Dale Campbell-Savours, who at the time was the Member of Parliament for Workington, proposed a university of the Lakes, which in some ways was meant as a virtual university, but at the end of the day it was not successful, and a traditional university was chosen instead. However, for many years we had had a very good art college, which became the institute of art. We pulled those things together and two years ago we were able to say, "We have a university of Cumbria." That was a magnificent day for many of us—as I said, the area had waited 300 years—and, as hon. Members can I imagine, we were rather pleased.

There is no doubt that the university has teething troubles. The buildings are spread throughout the county: it has two campuses in Carlisle; there is one in west Cumbria; another, called Newton Rigg—it used to be the old agricultural college—is out in Penrith; and there is a 115-year-old teacher-training college, Charlotte Mason college, in the Lake District at Ambleside. Those facilities were brought together, along with part of St. Martin's college in Lancaster, to create the university of Cumbria. We are well aware that we need the university if we are to attract talent and business, and to keep that talent. That has gone very well, and I am thankful to the Labour Government for that provision.

There is, however, a difficulty about the location of the headquarters, which I think, being MP for Carlisle, and because it is by far the largest city in the area, should obviously be in the city of Carlisle. That was agreed, as too—finally—was the Caldew viaduct site, which I suggested many years ago. Everything was going well until the current economic problems. We now have an £8.4 million annual deficit and the capital moneys for the headquarters might no longer be available or its provision might be stalled. I find that puzzling, because as far as I am aware there has been no cut in the higher education budget, so it is not a question of the effect of the recession. Rather, there are obviously other issues at play, and over the past month or two the local media have highlighted the problems.

I have talked about the campuses at Charlotte Mason in Ambleside and at Newton Rigg in Penrith. One of my concerns is about the talk of mothballing those campuses and moving a lot of the staff and the teachers to Lancaster—to return to the 1960s, that was when Cumbria lost out to Lancaster, which is now probably one of the top 12 universities in the country. However, the reality is that we cannot have a university of Cumbria, the majority of whose students are in Lancaster. That will undermine the whole process.

I asked the new vice-chancellor—I sympathise with him, because he has not been in post very long—to come down on Monday afternoon to discuss the situation with Cumbrian parliamentarians from both Houses. I

would like to ask the Minister, who is now in his place, whether he will have time after that meeting, probably early in the new year, to meet a delegation including myself and others to discuss the matter further. Although we have made great progress, we have a problem, and we have to come through it.

I recognise that the university of Cumbria has to build its own reputation. I suspect that it might be many years before it has the reputation that Oxford has, but that is what we must try to achieve. We must try to improve the university. However, we will overcome the problem. The university has stalled, but it will continue; indeed, other great strides have been made during this time. Before 1997, we did not have any medical training whatever in Cumbria. We are now part of a medical school and are training medical students. We also have a campus of the new dental school based in Liverpool, so we have made amazing strides and we are looking forward to the future.

What I would say to those hon. Members who take universities for granted is that there are parts of this country that have been deprived for centuries. We are getting over that, but we should not lose the impetus. We should continue to strive to make higher education available to as many people as possible.

1.33 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) (Con): I congratulate the Chairman, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), on introducing this debate and on his leadership of our Select Committees, which has been much appreciated. May I also commend the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who came into the House on the same day that I did in 1987? He has stuck up for his constituents and made an important point, to which I will obliquely return later.

It occurred to me in preparing for this debate that it is almost exactly 17 years to the day since I became the Further and Higher Education Minister, in the then Conservative Government. And, for the record, it is now nearly 15 years since I stopped being that Minister. I realise that that is a mere blink of an eye in the history of institutions as venerable as Oxford, Cambridge and St. Andrews. Nevertheless, I am staggered by how many of the issues remain current. It is rather like the gentleman from Salamanca university in the late middle ages who was locked up by the Inquisition for five years and resumed his next lecture with the deathless words: "As I was saying yesterday".

When I was doing the job as the Higher Education Minister, I was very much involved in higher education quality issues and issues of access to higher education. It would not be generally known, because it was private correspondence, but my first request through my private office on becoming Minister was for further information on the socio-economic background of participants in higher education at that time. One therefore should not feel that we are talking about a matter of interest to just one or two parties. It is remarkable to me, looking over that period, how little has changed with the institutions that we are dealing with—and in certain cases, the personalities we are dealing with. At the same time, however, the sector has undergone major expansion since the 1990s, which has been superimposed on the rapid expansion that began in the 1960s after the Robbins report and was accelerated in the 1980s, so that, in rough terms, we now have between 10 and 20 times as many students as in my days as an undergraduate.

I suppose that we should declare any current interests. First, I was a member of the previous Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills. I signed the report and in no way do I resile from our conclusions. For the reason that the Chairman of that Committee has outlined, we needed to be pretty trenchant in what we said. As for my personal interest, I suppose that I should declare that I am a graduate of Oxford university, as we are well represented here. At the same time, my wife comes from an educational background in the Principality, as some hon. Members might be aware. I am also a governor of the University of Wales Institute in Cardiff. I say that not as some statement of virtue—although it is a hugely engaging, interesting and constructive job—but, I hope, as a validation of a certain range of interest in higher education across the piece.

Anyway, it is far too late in my political career for any covert elitism or for making elaborate gestures against alleged dumbing down, or even any in favour of it. Nor am I particularly interested in megaphone diplomacy with Universities UK about alleged strengths and weaknesses. What seems practical is that we should recognise the strengths and find practical and useful ways of mitigating the weaknesses, always operating within the context of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Even if we have been quite harsh and blunt as a Select Committee in some parts of our report and its press release, it is entirely proper that we have challenged some of the conventional wisdom and any element of defensive complacency. To quote from almost my first speech as an ingénu Minister, from about the first time that I was let out and considered safe enough to speak in public, "The days of the unaccountable professional are over." That was true in 1993, and it is still true.

In relation to my work as a governor of the institution that I have mentioned, perhaps I might also advert the fact that I am particularly proud that one of the bits of our mission statement is that governors should act as the safeguards and guardians of the philosophy of dissent. It is terribly important, and entirely consistent with the principles and values of higher education, that we should have a debate about such matters. We should bring them out and not seek to push them under the carpet.

I would like to begin my remarks by putting three points firmly on the record, in case they are misunderstood. The first point—I say this in no sense to soften up the opposition to our report or another view to it, wherever that might come from—is that the British university system, although not faultless, is an overall success story on almost all counts, including student numbers, which have already been referred to, and completions of degrees. We have a low drop-out rate and high participation and success. We have major international participation, which has also been referred to, and, at the same time, we sustain research excellence well above our weight. Some of the great continental universities—the Parises, the Bolognas and the Bonns of this world—have tended to fall behind simply because they have fallen victim to the coils of bureaucracy and inadequate resourcing.

Last time I said something good about British higher education, it coincided with a lecture tour that I was giving in the states of the former East Germany. I delivered

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

a speech in Halle, which was duly picked up by *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, which gave me the headline—shock, horror!—"Minister goes to East Germany to say nice things about British higher education". However, it was and remains my view that those comments are appropriate.

My second general point is that Kingsley Amis got it wrong when he said "More will mean worse." In my earlier days, I would perhaps have said that "More will mean different", and I would now modify that message only slightly to read "More means more diverse." To take my own institution, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, as an example, we have just been under the hammer of the Quality Assurance Agency because of our application to be awarded research degree-awarding powers. We were awarded those powers on 7 September, and we are now proceeding with an application for university status and title. It was an intense process, involving the engagement of specialists, the entire academic body and the governance of the institution; it was no soft touch.

However, obtaining those research powers does not preclude our institution from offering initial teacher training or being actively involved with further education colleges. It is not an either/or situation. Sometimes, when we talk about diversity in the system, we do not always recognise that it can exist not only across different institutions but within an institution, where different departments are doing particular things according to their own strengths.

In any case, I do not think that it would be acceptable to revert to some kind of rosy, cosy myth of an Edwardian university, with donnish obscurity plus a few self-indulgent, privileged undergraduates. Even if we wanted to do that—I do not believe that anyone does—we could not, because there is now a huge stakeholding in higher education across society. The aspiration to get one's children into higher education has now become a kind of middle class entitlement. The issue is whether those from other classes and backgrounds can match that. In addition, a dynamic economy requires a significantly graduate population.

The third issue that I want to mention is that of institutional autonomy. In evidence, Dr. John Hood, in particular, averted to the changing character of autonomy. As the Chairman has already said, our Select Committee attached importance to those observations. I am slightly sorry that the Government have rejected the idea of a concordat on this subject. Even if the Minister is not in favour of that, he needs to impose a self-denying ordinance above and beyond any legal constraints that he might have.

Dr. Evan Harris: I want to endorse what the hon. Gentleman says about the importance of that recommendation to review the meaning of autonomy. In some areas, there is not enough autonomy; academic freedom is under threat and needs to be safeguarded. In others, however, the taxpayer is entitled to expect universities not to hide behind their autonomy if they are unwilling to engage in evidence-based processes that would widen participation or improve standards.

Mr. Boswell: I entirely endorse the spirit of that intervention. It is better that we should look at this subject properly, and not in an hysterical way. To make a general point about educational debate, it is, paradoxically, often expressed in terms of an either/or situation: either one is completely in favour of autonomy or one is against it. Such false polarities characterise so many of these debates, and we should look at the matter objectively.

In any case, the Minister needs to hold himself back, and he and his colleagues in the devolved Administrations need to look at the activities of their funding bodies. There is evidence that they collectively hanker after centralised planning functions, which, in my view, they are ill equipped to discharge, and possibly legally constrained from so doing.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As ever, my hon. Friend makes a thoughtful contribution to our considerations. Does he agree that the best expression of autonomy is when autonomous bodies collaborate, and that the funding mechanisms need to pump-prime, or at least catalyse, that kind of collaboration, which is a celebration of autonomy, not its negation?

Mr. Boswell: That, too, was a hugely helpful intervention. We are beginning to build up a picture. We really must stop telling people in higher education what they have to do, and leave them to make the right decisions. That is not meant as a threatening remark. If we are to implement reforms, they need to achieve buy-in from academics and institutions, whose confidence in the system we must retain, and whose self-confidence we must not subvert in the process. We do not want an infantilised HE system that is simply told what to do.

Having cleared those preliminaries, I want to speak to three areas of policy. At first sight, they might seem disparate, but I believe that, when viewed from a wider perspective, they hang together. The first is the quality assurance system, to which the Chairman has already referred at length. As I have mentioned, I played a part in this. In some respects, it has come under increasing strain: first, conceptually, because it is still not clear from the evidence—it was not clear to me when I was a Minister—how we compare a first in one discipline with a first in another, or firsts obtained from different institutions. These are difficult "apples and pears" questions to respond to.

Operationally, there is also a lack of clarity. We need to be aware that there is a temptation, or a tendency, towards upwards academic drift, about which we have already heard. At one end, that might involve the Russell group, with its higher proportion of firsts; the other end might involve some of the hairier anecdotes that we pick up and occasionally hear in evidence about courses that have been "stuffed".

I know from our own work that there are some interesting dilemmas between the extent to which one should try to get people in for access reasons—through clearing, for example, and by other means—as against the maintenance of standards. It is an interesting question: do we want the proportion from clearing to rise, to remain at the same level, or to drop? The answer is not necessarily the same for all institutions.

We need to achieve a system that delivers more perceived autonomy and that also has more teeth to deal with cases of alleged failure. We have also heard examples of that. We have allies in this matter, and, in some respects, things are easier than they used to be. We now have the

national students survey, which I welcome. We also have local student feedback. We must bear in mind that students are now stakeholders, because they are paying fees. I know that some universities are concerned about people going to a TripAdvisor-type system and rating their professor, as happens in some American institutions. I do not think that we could stop that. My own family would certainly use TripAdvisor to check out a hotel, and I do not think it unreasonable for someone to check out their professor as well, as long as they did not take everything that they read on such feedback sites literally.

As Universities UK mentioned in its response, money spent on quality assurance has opportunity costs. The Government's proposed cuts in the higher education budget are likely to drive a wish to achieve value for money, but we need to ask how much money we should spend in order to save money. I would be inclined to go against the message from the Select Committee and give the external examiner system one last chance. If we were to do that, we would need some kind of external, central involvement in spot-checking, outside the system, perhaps involving inserting an extra examiner from time to time.

I would also like to see some international participation. People will immediately comment that no one other than ourselves has an external examiner system. That might be true, but if such a system is a virtue for us, it could be educational for us to have someone coming over from Bonn university, or Rimini, or wherever. It could also be a useful way of cross-checking our own achievements. Are we as good as we think we are? That is the question that we have to keep asking. Our potential students will also ask it, whether they come from the United Kingdom or abroad. As the new chief executive of the Quality Assurance Agency, Anthony McClaran, has already reported, there are signs that the agency will place greater emphasis on institutional audits, as well as the alternative route of cause for concern inquiries. This is perhaps the more fruitful area for levering up standards.

I have mentioned the great efforts that my institution had to make to get itself accredited for research degree-awarding powers. The logic is that institutions should go through a re-accreditation process in a way that would be quite familiar to American universities, up to and including Harvard. I am not sure that we need to go that far, but I believe that there needs to be a slight element of precariousness in degree-awarding powers. They are bestowed, but they should also be able to be suspended or withdrawn with good cause.

It is perhaps ironic that I am leaning towards a two-tier structure with a re-introduction of some of the old distinctions between HEFCE as the funding council and the Higher Education Quality Council, which was run by the academic world, before the two in effect came together in the QAA. I acknowledge that the taxpayer has a perfectly proper interest in seeing that the £15 billion of public funds are well spent and that students are getting degrees with at least a minimum threshold standard, while the institutions operate to proper and internationally acceptable standards of academic commitment and governance. I want to emphasise the need for governance to be coincident with the academic effort. If governors are not talking to the academic board, they should be.

Beyond that threshold issue, or above it, the academic world itself both wants and claims to be able to manage a quality assurance system within its own institutions and by reference and audit across. This needs to be academically driven and focused on meeting quality standards. That needs largely to be influenced not so much by some comparison with a Platonic norm, as by compliance or otherwise with the academic goals and aspirations set by the institution itself including what it asks of and or promises to deliver to its student body. I am not so interested in a sort of Gertrude Stein-ish "A first is a first is a first" as a definition of common quality standards. I am interested in the double questions: in a degree from a certain university, first, is there something that has currency—the national interest test—and, secondly, does the course meet the needs and aspirations of students, which is the user test?

That brings me to qualifications. Part of the enhanced diversity to which I referred is the explosion of activity at all levels. In my days as an undergraduate, it would almost have been possible to claim no acquaintance with mature students at all and not very much with graduates. Now the whole system has opened up, with huge participation in higher degrees, mature students and part-time students, all on different courses and with their activities co-existent. These may range, for example, from diplomas and foundation degrees, which I now feel, having been an earlier sceptic, are one of the better innovations of the present Government, through, first, undergraduate degrees—the classic degree—to taught masters' degrees and doctorates. Remember also the huge range of opportunities for short courses and continuing professional development qualifications. My own institution is quadrupling its CPD effort over the next few years.

I am sure that we are right to call for a closer look at the integration or at least the concentration of policy between further and higher education and more generally within the framework of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning. We need to drop what I used to characterise as "Go at 18 for three years and you're out", and develop a much more flexible framework to meet the needs of students, including those returning to study after a break and, of course, those in remote parts of the country to whom the hon. Member for Carlisle referred; Cornwall is the same sort of issue. We need to meet the needs of employers, and they operate in localities as well.

Into this area falls the need for better transcripts of actual attainment rather than the current classification system that no longer seems fit for purpose; we have been told that as if we did not need to work it out for ourselves. We need a properly functioning credit system that carries credibility and is accepted, and a proper national record of achievement. I sometimes ask myself why we got that far by 1993 but have got no further forward since. As academics would certainly say, Rome was not built in a day, but all of this agenda has been, to my knowledge, at least 20 years in the gestation.

Finally, I want to refer to students themselves. They are now a major force in society, even in politics, and, very largely, a force for good, both now in their student days but also as developed and empowered citizens as graduates. Certainly those we met during our evidence gathering gave an excellent account of themselves and, in doing so, revealed the diversity of roots and backgrounds that now characterise the sector.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What does the hon. Gentleman say to the critics who would compare the activity and work of our students with other students in other countries and suggest that our students do not work hard enough?

Mr. Boswell: I would always take that with a measure of scepticism, although not always from the hon. Gentleman, but this kind of thing needs analysis. Even within our own student sector, the word on the street is that some courses, some universities and some types of approach are much more or less demanding than others. It is a bit odd that this has arisen through a quality framework that is supposed to be delivering not a uniform product but a product to uniform principles, if I may put it that way.

Mr. Andrew Smith: Would not it be appropriate at this juncture to place on the record our appreciation of those aspects of student activity that do not so often capture the headlines in our local press or come to us in our mailbags—the enormous contribution that students make to charitable work, community activity and to politics, as well as to sporting activities in the areas served by the universities? That work greatly benefits local civic society.

Mr. Boswell: I hugely agree. It is very important. To be frank, I doubt very much whether I would be a Member of Parliament now had I not participated in junior common room activity at university and done things that were, frankly, probably more educational than the courses that I may, or may not, have taken at that time. Let us celebrate that and not be mealy-mouthed about it. It is good news and, as I said, a force for good.

One only has to be a constituency MP to be sensitive to the pressures that are now coming on to students. The House knows that we did not engage on the fees issue ahead of Lord Browne's review; it would have been improper and unhelpful to do so. But, without being pointed to the Minister, it would be difficult to overlook the known problems with the Student Loans Company and the recent Office for Fair Access report on the widespread lack of awareness of bursaries even when they were on offer. Whatever eventual student support package is hammered out has to be fair, affordable and sustainable.

On the access issue, there are two levels. One is touched on in the report: the admission of students with regard to their own context and background. The second, which is much more difficult to identify, is what I might call the non-admission of students who have never been encouraged to apply in the first place and whose experience of the state education system seldom, if ever, gave them a chance to do so. There is a chilling effect, as well the pressures on students who do get in.

Across the student scene, the quality issues to which I have referred will be pointed and aggravated by the squeeze on public funding, about which we heard yesterday. Clearly a cut of public support for higher education on the scale envisaged—£600 million, I gather—even if it has been heavily discounted in advance and if prudent higher education institutions have factored it into their planning, is likely to change many aspects of the scene quite radically. I hope that, as the report suggests, we will encourage Lord Browne in what seems to be his widening remit to look at some of the wider issues, not just the tuition fees issue on its own.

We touched in our report on the issues of postgraduates, overseas students and, my own particular interest, part-time students, who already make up a major, or even in some cases a preponderant part of the student body in many institutions. Trying to meet their needs and the needs of our future society will need a radical and more flexible approach. I hope that in due course we can look afresh at the unique importance of the student support package. Frankly, the Education Act 1962, when I was an undergraduate, is still the driver of all this. The good old ship has gone along for 47 years, collecting barnacles, wrinkles and all the other things that good old ships have, but occasionally they have to be taken to the breakers' yard and we have to start again.

Our entire concept of funding, and of the regulation of student numbers, is driven by this good old model, yet the reality is that student life is now far broader and more diverse than ever it was then. To cater for the conventional cohort—for the students the media still write about—is often to neglect the legitimate interests of other students. The entire locus of business, further education, skills acquisition and the needs of the future economy are simply not factored in. I personally would favour initiating a process of shifting—over time, I stress—to a package of support for all post-compulsory education together. That would need to be largely student-driven, and it would include entitlements to public funding based on entry qualifications and neutral as to the mode and time of delivery, topped up with student savings, inputs from employers, and any top-up national or local public funding to meet specific needs.

There are, perhaps, welcome signs of the Government, in their present economic difficulties, moving towards this—I heard the Chief Secretary being interviewed on "Newsnight". Sadly, however, this is largely motivated by the need to make cuts, rather than by a desire to enhance the role of students and their universities, but this mode of thinking in responding to these much more diverse needs is nevertheless right. Also, although the Minister undoubtedly faces difficulties ahead, he must plan for happier times as well, and I detect a real readiness among higher education institutions to get on with that job.

In all of this, I am conscious of the need to work with the grain of academic opinion and student interests. No Minister in the United Kingdom should claim to deliver higher education, and no Minister should aspire to do so over the heads of those who actually do deliver higher education. Furthermore, no Minister should wish to ride roughshod over academic interests in the cause of the nostrum of the day.

There is a perfectly proper role for Parliament in acting on behalf of the taxpayers, and that is one of the jobs our Select Committee has decided to try to advance. We have a right and a duty to inquire about, and call for, appropriate changes and developments, but the House will not expect me, at this late stage of my parliamentary career, to shun the importance of the great institutions that we have at all levels, or to denigrate their palpable achievements to date.

2.2 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I was one of those non-grammar school boys who were fortunate enough to be admitted to the university of Hull in 1958.

In those days, there were only 23 universities. This report talks a lot about access, but access to universities is a lot easier today than it was in 1957 when I was due to matriculate. I must admit that I had never heard of the word "matriculate"; I thought it was a medical term, but I soon realised how hard matriculation really was, because in those days in order to get into university it was necessary to have an O-level in a foreign language. Greek and Latin were preferred, but French would also be accepted. However, my only language was "Lancky", and getting into a white rose university when speaking with a strong Lancashire accent was even more difficult.

However, I made it to the university of Hull, and it was a life-changing moment, such as everyone has. There are only a few truly life-changing moments. Coming to this place was another one for me, but going to university was the most life-changing moment. I think that is true for almost every young person who is fortunate and privileged enough to go to a university.

Going to university is not just about gaining a qualification. I went to university to graduate as a chemist. I wanted to study chemistry ever since I got my first chemistry set at the age of 11. That is all I wanted to do, and the chemical industry was looking for thousands of graduates in chemistry, so my reason for going to university was plain and simple. However, I realised soon after entering university that it was about more than getting an education. I was from a small country village. I had never met a black or Asian person, or a Buddhist or a Muslim. I met them at university, however. I was fortunate enough to be admitted to Ferens hall on the Cottingham road site of the university of Hull, and I was thrown together not with my chemistry colleagues, but with lawyers, philosophers and mathematicians from all over the world—Mauritius and Canada, for example. I send a lot of Christmas cards now, which is very expensive, but I do not mind because I have kept in contact with all the fabulous people I met. I learned about their culture and their opinions.

I was also surrounded by Tory students. My family had always been strong socialists. I did not go to university to be a politician, but I soon became one, because I had to defend my opinions against other people strongly expressing theirs. That was the case all around the university.

The library was fabulous, with row upon row of books. I did not browse only the chemistry stacks; I looked at all the other books, too, although I could not read them all, as there was not enough time. We have to realise that, for every student who goes to university, the experience is much more than studying the subject. Of course I studied hard—I had to—but I learned so much. It was a true life-changing experience.

Halls of residence are important in this regard. So many of our students now live in terraced housing in the cities, sometimes four or five in a house, and they learn from each other, of course. However, I learned a lot more by being in a hall of residence, and I regret the fact that we are not building student accommodation on the same scale as in the past. It was not cheap, either, by the way. Of course, I was lucky enough to get a grant, as I came from a family with a modest income. That is why I was always cautious about grants and fees, and I still am cautious in the debate about top-up fees—a topic I may return to soon.

In those days, there was also a certain deference to members of staff. We could not challenge some of the professors, as they were elitist. That is something else that has changed—and for the good, in my opinion. Students are much more challenging today. They are much more willing to challenge their professors and lecturers about their opinions. When I was lecturing at university, I always said to my students, "Don't believe every word I am saying or every word you read in the textbook. I am only giving you today's opinion. Tomorrow's opinion might be different." I think all lecturers should get that message out clearly to all their students.

Another difference between now and then is that there were far fewer courses to choose from. The prospectuses were half as thick as they are today, and it was fairly easy to choose a subject to study. Today, however, prospectuses contain a mind-boggling variety of combinations of courses. As the Chairman of our Select Committee, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), has already said, some prospectuses are not very well laid out. I think that students are drawn to the more attractive prospectuses, however, and universities are now realising that one way to attract good students is to produce a colourful prospectus with lots of clearly laid out information.

There are far more students nowadays, too: 2.3 million of them, as has been said. Consequently, lecturers are having to teach much larger groups. I have lectured in a lecture theatre to groups of 100 people, mainly coming in from different departments for a lesson on an ancillary subject. I would not like to lecture to 100 or 200 students regularly, however, because the personal contact between lecturer and student is very important. It is particularly important in tutorials, but nowadays tutorial groups are very large, sometimes with 20 or 30 students. I used to have groups of five or six, and I got to know all my students quite well. I was therefore able to know their abilities and classify them almost before they got their degree classifications—without telling them, of course. The move to teaching larger groups of students at universities has taken away some of that important personal contact.

Mr. Hayes: Does this changed dynamic the hon. Gentleman describes—the altered relationship between teacher and taught—not emphasise the need for us to be clear about the quality of teaching and learning, as the Select Committee report argues?

Dr. Iddon: Yes, I absolutely agree. It is okay to lecture to large groups, but university teachers must be able to meet students in smaller groups as well. It is also extremely important to have tutorials run by a lecturer, rather than by a graduate student, which is increasingly the trend today.

Our report also talks about plagiarism, which has not been mentioned yet. We talk to students and lecturers alike about plagiarism, which is undoubtedly on the increase. It is a much bigger problem today than in my day, but it existed then. Let me tell hon. Members a little story. As a chemist, I used to give unknown chemicals to my students, and they had to go and analyse them chemically and with instrumentation. I would give them compound No. 24, for example, and they would come back with a perfectly written account, with the right answer at the bottom, about what chemical

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it was. I had a very bright student who always came back with the right result. His copy was absolutely perfect—I could not fault it—but I became very suspicious of him. I thought that he was picking up the practical books of students from former years, finding out exactly which chemical compound No. 24 was, and giving me the right analysis. He was plagiarising. So I decided to crush some Polo mints up and give them to him as compound No. 36. He came back with a perfect analysis for compound No. 36, only to be very disappointed when I said, "I don't know how you've got that, because what I gave you was just Polo mints."

We have to be careful about plagiarism, which is harder to pick up today. Some lecturers have told us that they can pick out, with complicated computer programmes, students who are plagiarising, but I think that students are smarter than computers.

Mr. Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend accept that the House deserves to know whether the student he mentioned got a first at the end of his degree? Secondly, he will remember that when he and I were university teachers, new ways of teaching and learning might not have arrived, but we were not taught or given any instruction about how to teach.

Dr. Iddon: My hon. Friend's latter point is absolutely true. In answer to his first point, I have conveniently forgotten.

Another sad thing about universities today is the fact that academic staff are not encouraged to take on extra-mural activities. The postgraduate side of work has killed that, and the research assessment exercise, which is now known as the REF—research excellence framework—exercise. In my time, academics were positively encouraged to get involved in the community and to be councillors. I was a councillor for 21 years. I still did the same amount of teaching as all my colleagues and I still ran a research group, but I felt comfortable enough to do another job, as well, which I hope was of benefit to my local community. Academics were also encouraged to be justices of the peace on the bench of the local magistrates court, and to be school governors. I picked up an interest in demonstrating my chemistry knowledge and did a famous "magic of chemistry" show once a month for 29 years. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) has seen that show in Huddersfield city hall.

Today, however, because of the pressures on academic staff, they rarely get involved in the community. I was a safety officer for 13 years in my chemistry department, which was the largest in Britain. As such, I was often asked to investigate deaths, fatalities, explosions and fires to give a chemical analysis of what had happened. I investigated the burning down, in Manchester, of the biggest coffin factory in Britain, and I investigated a fatality in a small dye house in Brighouse, in Yorkshire. That wide-ranging experience meant that I was able, as a lecturer, to excite the students by giving anecdotes in between all the facts they needed to acquire from me. Universities have changed enormously, and academic staff and students have a lot more pressure on them today than I ever had.

In the past 10 years, under Labour Governments, we have had a 21 per cent. expansion in the number of students in universities, so access has become a lot easier for many people in that time. We have increased the amount of money spent on universities by 25 per cent.—in real terms, taking inflation into account—so I am very pleased with the way in which universities have developed in my time in Parliament.

I would like to take a pop at vice-chancellors, who have been very sensitive about the report—some more so than others. I should like to say to the people who have been caught by the report that if they have been a bit upset by it, we have done our job, because the only Select Committee reports we have ever done any good with are those that generated a lot of controversy. We once announced to the Royal Society that we were going to look at how it spent public money. My goodness, what an uproar there was! People asked how we dared to look at the Royal Society and the cream of scientists in Britain, but they were spending public money. In the end, the report was good, but it created a lot of debate and discussion about the Royal Society. I think that we helped to put it on the map. Some people had never heard of it. Similarly, this report has generated a lot of criticism and debate, but that is all to the good and is for the health of students and universities, both of which are the subject of the report.

Let me address some further comments to the vice-chancellors. The other day I saw a graph of salary rises for ordinary workers in all organisations and of salary rises for those who manage those organisations, which were well ahead. By the way, I declare an interest in this matter. I am a member of the University and College Union, so I speak from that point of view. If one looks at the way in which the salaries of vice-chancellors and academics have risen, there is no comparison between the two. I heard yesterday that public sector salaries were going to be pegged back to 1 per cent. next year, but I do not think that the salaries of vice-chancellors, and of chief executives of housing associations and other public bodies, will be pegged back to 1 per cent. I hope that they will, but I do not think so. Of course, I shall be reminded that they are independent organisations and that we cannot control the salaries of vice-chancellors—or can we? After all, we control the salaries of the staff who work for them.

Moving on, the relationship between teaching and research is discussed in the report. I have always believed, and still do, that it is important for teachers to be at the cutting edge of their subject. As far as I am concerned, with the odd exception, the only way of being at the cutting edge of one's subject is to do research, or through scholarship, which I accept is equal to research in some subjects. I found, by doing research in my subject and learning about what was happening in every laboratory all around the world, I could put on special courses for my third-year students about big molecules and carbon-60—and that was before Harry Kroto got his Nobel prize. That sort of thing excited my students, because they could see the frontiers of their subject advancing and many, although not all, of them wanted to do research. It is important to be at that cutting edge as a lecturer, so that one can pass on one's enthusiasm and passion for the subject that students want to know about.

I always found that the lecturers whom the students complained about—there were a lot of bad lecturers in the universities and perhaps there still are, although I hope there are fewer—were often those who came in from 9 till 5, did not work there during the summer vacation doing research and just did the basic job. I do not think that that can be done any more, but there must undoubtedly be some bad teachers out there. If research is done in a university, there is not only better teaching but a better library, because the researchers are aware of all the new publications and insist on the library putting them online or buying them in. For STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects in particular it is important to have a good library, but I think that is true of all subjects.

What can we do about bad teachers? I sat on the promotions committee of the university of Salford for more than 10 years, and I had to judge the best and worst teaching across departments, so I thought that I knew who the better and the bad teachers were. The problem was there, even though students and lecturers could complain and complain when they did not think someone was pulling their weight. Our report flagged this issue up. What can we do about poor teachers teaching undergraduates in universities? The universities have not really grasped the problem, but when teachers are flagged up early in their career as bad, it may not be entirely their fault. As my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield asked, what kind of training do they get? Some universities are still not unplugging these people and putting them into professional development programmes. Our report flags that up, and the universities really ought to take notice of it.

Mr. Sheerman: My hon. Friend is getting to the heart of the matter. Does he agree that the incentives to be a good university teacher are still very small? In contrast, publishing often very mundane articles in obscure journals has become such an industry, and is so well rewarded by universities, that teaching is still neglected.

Dr. Iddon: In my time, we did not differentiate between the three areas of teaching, administration and research. We had to do a bit of each, but that has declined in universities. People who can produce papers give their university a good reputation, and ironically the universities think—and I do too—that that attracts better students. Research has always been given a lot more importance than teaching, and that is even more true today. That is a shame, and I agree with my hon. Friend.

Our report also deals with contact times: when students are able to meet their teachers in the lecture theatre or the tutorial room. They vary enormously from one university to another, even within the same subject. At some universities and in some subjects, the contact times amount to about six or seven hours a week only. What are we teaching students? I used to have friends who believed that they could ignore lectures—they could not ignore practicals, which they had to attend—and still get a good degree. There are not many of those people around, of course, but I think that six or seven hours a week is a poor level of contact time in any subject. We must remember that we are looking for value for money. Some students pay full fees, so "value for money" is an important phrase—sadly, in my opinion.

In yesterday's pre-Budget report, a £600 million cut in the budget for higher education and science was announced, which the supporting papers say is to apply to "lower-value or lower-priority" programmes. I am not sure what that means, and if my hon. Friend the Minister can help us with that this afternoon, I am sure that many people in the academic system would be pleased.

Our report also talks about portable credits, another matter that has to do with access. The university of Bolton, which I represent, has one of the best access programmes of any university in Britain. The trouble at the other end, by the way, is that it has one of the worst drop-out rates. It gets praised for its access, but criticised for its drop-out levels. We really have to address that problem, and our report suggests a way out—the introduction of portable credits.

I have talked to many students who have studied both part time and full time at my local university. Some of them have to drop out for all kinds of reasons. For example, a student may have to drop out to take over a business when there is a death in the family. Again, women may have to leave to have children, or wives or husbands may have to follow their partners to another town when that partner gets a new job. Consequently, the students have to drop out of their local university course.

For a lot of people, particularly in communities such as mine, it is very difficult to stay at university and get a full-time, three-year degree. It is almost impossible for many. Part-time study is a boon for them, but even that can be difficult: people might have to drop out of even part-time study for a thousand and one reasons.

The report encourages universities to give credits for every part of the courses that students do, so that people can take the credits from one university to another, or even come back into the same university a few years later. We have to look at that if we are really serious about ensuring access to universities and degrees.

I have to congratulate the Government, as the infrastructure in universities today has improved tremendously. I am on the external advisory board of Manchester university's school of chemistry, and I visit quite regularly. The transformation of that university in the last decade has been so spectacular that I have not been able to believe what I have seen on my visits. I congratulate the Government on putting a lot of money into the infrastructure. I have even opened new laboratories that are state of the art.

Incidentally, one of the criticisms that industry often makes of students of STEM subjects concerns the university laboratories where we train them in techniques and instrumental procedures. If those laboratories are not as good as the industrial laboratories where they will work when they graduate, we are wasting our time. When this Labour Government first came into power, I am afraid that the instruments and laboratories were out of date. Industry was very critical of undergraduates' lack of experience when they started work, and it had to start training them from scratch. That situation has improved tremendously.

Our report also looks at international students. As I have said already, they are a tremendous boon in our universities because they give students a rounded experience. Some universities rely a lot more than others on attracting international students and if they could not come here in their present numbers, those universities would suffer badly. We should never forget that, so I just want the Government to be a bit cautious about the fees that

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international students are charged. It is not just about money. It is about having them here to interact with our own students, so money is not everything.

The report recommended a national bursary scheme, but sadly the Government have rejected that idea. There is a lot of competition now between universities, which have formed themselves into bodies such as the millennium plus group and the Russell group. That suggests that competition is going on, which is not altogether a bad thing. However, it would be a sad thing if some universities were able to give more and better bursaries than others. I agree with the report's conclusion that we should have a national bursary scheme, and I hope that my Government will have another look, please, at that proposal.

I have a very favourable attitude to the TRAC approach—the transparent approach to costing, which reveals the true costs of teaching and of research. There is some overlap, but there will always be a grey area in the middle, and it is very important to know how much we are spending on teaching across the departments of each university, and between one university and another. That has been another big step forward.

I shall finish by dealing with the Government's response to our report. They said that we painted a picture of our HE system in a less than positive light. I am sorry if we did that, because none of the Committee members who took part in these investigations wanted to paint our university system in a poor light. I think that I indicated through my concluding points that tremendous progress has been made all round—in admissions and in infrastructure. This country is still producing some of the best university students in the world at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and long may that remain so.

2.29 pm

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): I am delighted to be able to contribute to this estimates debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), who has great knowledge and experience of this area. May I congratulate the Select Committee on Science and Technology and, in particular, its Chairman, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), on giving us such a thought-provoking and wide-ranging report? I also congratulate him on his excellent speech. Indeed, all the speeches have been first class—I hope that hon. Members will excuse the pun—not just 13 per cent. of them. Perhaps we can have a Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education investigation at short notice into the number of first-class speeches being given in the House of Commons—although we still have some balance to come with the Front-Bench speeches.

As the House will know, I continue to take a particular interest in the higher education sector, so I was delighted when the Committee published this much-anticipated report back in August. Despite the controversy in the sector, I am grateful that the Committee has set out so many of the important issues in the higher education sector, not least those involved in the fees review, which we need to examine in detail. It was important that the report put down a few markers, and it has been helpful in doing that.

Hon. Members may be aware that last week I held a Westminster Hall debate on the future of higher education, which also proved to be useful and thought-provoking. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all the hon. Members who turned up and contributed so intelligently to that debate, because I know that it had a very early morning slot and a few people probably had to get in a bit earlier than they would have liked.

As I say, the report is thorough and wide ranging. It highlighted salient issues ranging from admissions to teaching, and from standards to scandals in some places. In some ways, there is so much in this report that it is difficult to know where to start, but I wish to use the time available to me today to build on some of the issues and arguments that I set out in that Westminster Hall debate, putting a particular focus on standards and quality. I should also like to say a few words about Professor Hopkin's report on the Student Loans Company and about the Minister's thoughts on the recently published report by Demos advocating the introduction of a "civic corps".

As autonomous institutions, universities have the responsibility for maintaining the standards of their awards and the quality of their teaching to students so that they can achieve those standards. The body responsible for assuring standards is the QAA but, as the Chair of the Select Committee said, the report notes that the QAA's role

"focuses on processes rather than standards."

In evidence to the Committee, the then QAA chief executive, Peter Williams, with whom I have discussed this several times, confirmed that the purpose of the organisation is to

"ensure that institutions have effective processes in place to secure their academic standards".

He continued,

"but we do not judge the standards themselves".

So although the QAA is said to have responsibility for assuring standards in universities, it has little or no power to enforce them. It is not like Ofsted, for example—it certainly does not have anything like the same powers.

I am not as critical of the QAA as this report or the Committee appears to be. I have no doubt that the QAA acts more as an influencer than as an enforcer of standards, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. In many cases, the results of its influence are reassuring in keeping standards high. However, the report is right to raise the following important questions: is it right that the organisation that inspects our universities has, in effect, no real powers; and is it right that it is directly funded through subscriptions by universities? The Committee is right to question the cosy relationship that apparently exists within the sector. For example, I was shocked by some of the reports that I received when I was shadowing this brief of the external examination system and the cross-checking of degrees. The QAA's current purpose, therefore, should be robustly challenged, and I think that that is what the report has done. When we talk about university standards, especially in the international context, we need to know that the quality assurance system is accountable, rigorous, transparent, responsive and public-facing.

The Committee rightly raised concerns about the comparability of academic standards between universities. I fully appreciate that there is no national curriculum in

higher education and nor do I want there to be. As they are autonomous institutions, it is only right that different courses are offered in different universities. In my former brief, I travelled around the country to numerous institutions and can understand why potential students are confused when applying to different institutions. However, the Committee struggled to assess the current situation, finding itself in difficulty when it dared to question whether a degree from Oxford university meant more than one from Oxford Brookes. The question made vice-chancellors very uneasy. However, in this day and age and at a crucial time for higher education, it is imperative that standards are understood in their consistent application across the sector. I simply ask whether all degrees, irrespective of where they are taken, should be set against a consistent set of standards across all higher education institutions.

If the fees review decides to open the market and to allow universities to set their own fee level, they will need to prove to students that they offer value for money and that their degrees are considered worthy by employers. The Government and vice-chancellors sell the concept of higher fees by saying how much more income will accrue through a worker's lifetime as a result. This needs to be evidence-based and to be constantly under review. In this digital age, there is absolutely no reason why universities cannot provide students with all the information that they need to make an informed choice.

It might well be the case, as the Committee's report suggests, that the current system of self-regulation is out of date in the 21st century. However, something holds me back from supporting this view unreservedly. My gut instinct is that on the whole—there are always exceptions—universities are at their finest when they are at their freest and at their best when they have more autonomy, not less.

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) talked about comparing apples and pears. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson) accept that a plural system is bound to be a diverse one, but that students need to know whether they are choosing apples or pears? The kind of information that he describes is essential if we are to create empowered learners.

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. It is about access to information. The more that universities become an arm of the state—through Whitehall or through quangos—the worse standards will become, weighed down by bureaucracy and box-ticking. The more interference that comes from Government and their agencies, the harder universities will find it to compete internationally.

Mr. Boswell: Following that earlier exchange, does my hon. Friend not agree that there is a risk that if too much is imposed from the centre, that might destroy some of the diversity that we all feel is important?

Mr. Wilson: That is critical. It is unimaginable to me that the Government should have any more involvement than they do in universities. That applies not just to the Government but to the arms of government, such as HEFCE, which are greatly involved in universities. Some would say that they have too much involvement and slightly suffocate universities' ability to undertake some of the activities that they would clearly like to undertake.

One thing that was outlined in the report and confirmed in the remarks made by the Chairman of the Select Committee is the culture at the top of the HE sector. The report described it as "characterised as defensive complacency". I happen to believe that in some parts of the sector there is defensiveness and complacency. There is also often ambivalence to criticism. Sadly, it sometimes reminds me of the "Little Britain" character whose answer to any question is "Computer says no." Sometimes, when speaking to vice-chancellors, I felt that, whatever the question, the reply would be the computer said no.

I believe that the universities have to give the question of standards and quality the seriousness it deserves and find a solution that generates confidence. However, I would instinctively rather that came from within the sector, not from the Government. From what the Chairman of the Select Committee said, it sounds like the QAA is taking that matter seriously.

Before things get too negative, let me say that I have great respect for vice-chancellors and the job they do in universities. Let us not forget that the sector is still world class and generates huge revenue for the country. The job is already difficult as many vice-chancellors have had to close departments, lay off staff and work within very tight budgets over the past couple of years. I am sure that their job will be made even harder by the Chancellor's announcement yesterday that the Government will cut £600 million from the higher education budget.

I have looked through the pre-Budget report, but it is not clear to me how the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property expects to achieve that saving by 2012-13. Perhaps this debate will give him a good opportunity to explain where that money will be saved. He must also tell us how, at a time when universities have been asked to "up their game", as Lord Mandelson put it, that will not have a detrimental impact on the learning experience or quality of education in our universities. However, things might become clear after we have heard an explanation, so I shall reserve my judgment.

Graduates will increasingly expect help with employability, especially in a continuing deep recession with high youth unemployment. When the Institute of Directors gave evidence to the Committee, it defined employability as a mixture of basic skills, personal qualities, good attitude and being reliable. To demonstrate a better service, universities should do all that they can to help their students to get into the world of work. Several universities are already leading the way in that area, including my own—the excellent Reading university—and it is fair to say that many universities that I have visited have dedicated teams to help students. Whatever happens with the fees review, universities will need to be able to demonstrate a marked improvement in the quality of the student experience.

It was worrying that the Committee's report detected no evidence that tuition fees at their current levels had driven up quality on campus. That is not surprising, given that fees hardly vary across the higher education sector, and therefore give students little incentive to look for value for money among institutions. It would appear that some universities are slightly short-changing students, so I agree with the Committee's recommendation

[Mr. Rob Wilson]

that the fees review should involve the commissioning of independent research on the impact of a higher cap on course quality. Neither the Government nor universities should expect students to pay thousands of pounds more for their degree if teaching and course content remain exactly the same.

As I have hinted today, and as I said during last week's debate, I am not completely satisfied that universities have justified the current level of tuition fees. As I have travelled around the country while shadowing the HE brief, I have felt that some students were being short-changed by the quality of teaching and the support services at some universities. The fees have raised an additional £1.3 billion for universities, but I am not sure that I have seen a £1.3 billion improvement in the student experience over the past five or six years.

Although comprehensive figures on student debt are still unavailable for the most recent intake, the figures that have been provided make sober reading. A recent survey estimated that students who commenced their studies in 2006-07 could expect to owe an average of £17,500 on graduation, while those starting in 2007-08 could see their average debt increasing to £21,500. Of course, medical students' debts are much higher, so I say again that before the Government consider saddling our young people with even more debt, it will be imperative for the fees review to justify how the existing fee money has been spent to improve the student experience.

Ensuring that students have access to robust and comparable information about what they can expect from their time at university must be at the heart of proposals coming out of the review. It is only right that students, as fee-paying customers, receive the best and most accessible advice and guidance that universities can offer, although of course that is if students are lucky enough to secure the funding to which they are entitled in the first place.

Professor Hopkin's report into the student loan fiasco found "conspicuous failures" in the current system that led to universities shelling out hundreds of thousands of pounds in emergency funds to students left without money. The report found that the processing system had faced problems due to lost documents, equipment failures and difficulties with the online application system. Only 5 per cent. of phone calls were answered at peak time. The Minister knows what a monumental cock-up this was by the Government. Financial support is specifically targeted to help those who need it most, and it is exactly those people who have been so badly let down by the fiasco. Indeed, some have now left university and many more are still suffering. Many families have been counting the pennies this year, and the last thing that they needed was to have to fork out extra funds thanks to Government and Student Loans Company incompetence.

I shall give the House a couple of real examples of the difficulties that families have faced. One student says:

"I am a 30-year-old mature student with a one-year-old child. I have embarked on a one-year PGCE course... I applied at the beginning of the year and have not received any funds at all. My tax credits stopped when my course began and I cannot pay my child's nursery fees. I am struggling to survive financially and cannot afford to live never mind buy the books. I fear I will be forced to leave university in the New Year if someone does not intervene."

This crisis is a real blow to the widening of participation. Here is another example:

"My daughter has been told she is eligible for a grant and loan. She has received nothing. I lost my job and have had to borrow the £1,000 first payment for hall-of-residence and pay for food etc. Neither her father nor I went to university and we are so proud of her. She is sick with worry and does not want to be a burden to us. She then received a letter telling her she will get no money until January. She is distraught and about to leave, thankfully, she received an A for her first piece of work. She has agreed to stay but says money worries are affecting her study and health. She is not the only one."

I can confirm that she is not the only one. I was recently at a Wantage hall founder's dinner at my university, the university of Reading, and I was fortunate enough to talk at length to a number of students. Many had not received the money to which they were entitled and were in desperate financial trouble. One female student told me that unless she could find £700 by Christmas, she would have to leave.

We could go into almost any university and, with very little or no effort, find the same story, demonstrating the size of the cock-up. In November, 176,000 students had still not received the financial support that they were promised and to which they were entitled.

Mr. Willis: May I say what a powerful case the hon. Gentleman is making about what is an absolute crisis? Does he agree that, in summing up, it would be useful if the Minister could guarantee that the second tranche of Student Loans Company grants will be paid on 28 January? Without it, literally tens, if not hundreds or thousands of students will simply have to leave university at that point.

Mr. Wilson: That is exactly the message that I have received from students, and I hope that the Minister will directly address that question when he sums up. I know that the Front-Benchers are anxious to speak, and I shall try to finish in a couple of minutes if they will all bear with me.

A recent report by Demos included comments and proposals on the introduction of a civic corps—it would be paid for by increasing the rate of interest that university graduates pay on their loan—to carry out community service. I fully appreciate that our young and unemployed people need real action to help them to turn their lives around, and volunteering in the community can be a way of raising self-esteem and helping people to develop important soft skills, such as teamwork, while doing something positive for the local area. Indeed, such initiatives sit very well with my party's plans to get Britain working and, in particular, our "Work Together" initiatives, which involve volunteering in local communities.

But where have those comments come from? Are we not in the middle of an independent fees review? Anyone making such comments is surely pre-judging the outcome of the fees review, so, unless I have misunderstood the Minister or he has been misquoted, the situation makes no sense at all. I would genuinely find it helpful if he dealt with the issue, because, if he did make those comments in the middle of the fees review, he has been very unhelpful.

The Committee's report looked at community colleges, and, as the Minister and others will know, I have been passionate about them for some time. The report looked at credits, which, for the purposes of widening participation,

are incredibly important to the system in this country, because they enable people to drop in and out of study as their lives dictate. I do not see why we in the UK, given our progressive sector, should not be able to do something that is comparable in flexibility to the US community college system. I acknowledge that the Government have made moves in that direction by broadening foundation degrees. However, much more could be done.

The Select Committee report is right to say that

"if the community college credit system model operating in the US were adopted in England, it would provide much greater flexibility in higher education in this country, which will be essential to widening participation."

That is absolutely right. I will not go through the other interesting aspects of the community college system, but they are mentioned in the Select Committee's report and I endorse them.

As the Minister knows, this is an opportunity to make the real changes that the sector needs. Now is the time for fresh and innovative thinking. I thank the Select Committee for its report and for making a thought-provoking contribution to what will be an interesting but very intense debate over the weeks, months and years to come.

2.51 pm

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): This has been an excellent debate, although I am not sure that I want to put a classification on it. I enjoyed the thoughtful and good-natured contribution made by the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson). I also enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), who talked about his journey across the Pennines to Hull; I was reminded of my own journey across the Severn estuary, with the valleys-boy accent that I had at the time, to the strange world of Bristol university, where I met different classes of people whom I had never come across before.

This debate shows Parliament at its best, because it is based on a Select Committee report that is an example of Parliament at its best. During my first two and a half years as a Member, I thoroughly enjoyed serving on the Committee that preceded the now former Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). Select Committee reports make an important contribution. I wish that we had more opportunities such as this to debate the thorough research and evidence-based reports that Select Committees produce.

Yesterday's pre-Budget report provides a context, and it has already been mentioned by a couple of speakers. On page 110, among a series of bullet points covering cuts in IT, the criminal justice system, residential care and rail franchises, is tucked away a reference to anticipated cuts in higher education:

"£600 million from higher education and science and research budgets from a combination of changes to student support within existing arrangements; efficiency savings and prioritisation across universities, science and research".

The Minister has already been asked to provide several bits of information when he sums up. I hope that he will clarify what that £600 million-worth of cuts means. I am thinking particularly of student support, which has been on a rollercoaster in the past 12 years. Grants were first abolished, then reintroduced. Provision was then extended, but clawed back 12 months ago. I hope that there will not be a further rollercoaster ride for students.

Mr. Boswell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the worst possible things would be if students had gone to university with a particular profile of grants and loans on offer, and then found that those were being withdrawn and that their legitimate expectations were not being met?

Stephen Williams: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Students in their third year may already have a completely different financial scenario from what prevailed when they applied; not only that, but students from the same families who are assessed on family income may also experience entirely different outcomes. Brothers and sisters doing the same thing may have different grants or eligibility for maintenance loans.

Will the Minister also clarify what the cuts in science and research will be? The Chancellor said in yesterday's pre-Budget report that science, innovation and a low-carbon economy were the way forward for this country, and Lord Mandelson has said much the same. It would be perverse if all that were now undermined by budget cuts.

The hon. Member for Reading, East mentioned the report on the Student Loans Company by Professor Sir Deian Hopkin, which came out on 8 December. It is a particularly damning report, and it is strange that there has been no sign of contrition on the part of the directors of the Student Loans Company. I remind the House that these people actually paid themselves a bonus last year, when they should have been preparing for their new responsibilities for this year. Will the Minister clarify his and his Department's responsibilities in this respect? Will he undertake, at least between now and the election—I am not necessarily predicting what will happen then—to follow closely the progress of the directors of the Student Loans Company to ensure that we do not have a repeat of this fiasco and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough mentioned, further grants are paid on time?

Mr. Rob Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the president of the National Union of Students that heads should roll at the Student Loans Company?

Stephen Williams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. In fact, I can agree with myself about that, because I said the same thing at the same time as Wes Streeting. Liberal Democrats and the NUS were in complete agreement on that matter.

The Select Committee report is wide-ranging, and we could have spent all afternoon discussing different aspects of it. Indeed, annexe 2 lists a whole raft of things that the Committee did not have time to look at in detail, notably the contribution of further education, the delivery of higher education, and postgraduate study. I hope that the successor Committee will find time to look at those important, valuable areas.

I want to focus on two aspects covered in the report—admissions and resources—and then the three areas of concern that it identified. First, on admissions, I think that widening participation in higher education is now,

[Stephen Williams]

it is pleasing to note, pretty much common ground between those on the three Front Benches. We have had enough debates with each other to know that although we may disagree on some of the policies, we are at least personally committed to ensuring that widening participation is very much on the political agenda. I welcome that common commitment, because we know that there is still a stark social divide in terms of who goes to university. We can have a debate about the absolute number of people who go to university, but who goes is still very much an area for legitimate concern.

The subtext of fair access to higher education is also addressed in the report. That is incredibly important. I have often heard vice-chancellors of Russell group or 1994 group universities say that fair access is not important in volume terms. Of course, with 1 million undergraduates at university, fair access probably can be seen as not that important. However, in terms of what happens to people who go to our research-intensive universities later on in life, and whether they become Members of this place or leading members of the media, the judiciary or other leading professions, it certainly matters who gets an opportunity to access those universities. It is absolutely right that the Committee considered that, and all politicians should ensure that it stays on the agenda. Contextual information about the applicant is extremely important. I agree with the Committee when it says that the state is entitled to take a view on fair access to our universities even if that can be perceived as overriding institutional autonomy.

Information, advice and guidance to university applicants is very important in ensuring that people are well prepared for making their application and know what is expected of them. That is not always clear. It is tragic to hear sixth formers or people in FE colleges say, "I wanted to study this, but I've only now discovered that I needed to persevere with physics or to have done better in maths." Good information about what is needed to apply to all universities, but particularly those that are perceived as research-intensive, is absolutely vital. Universities do a lot of good work on that in the context of outreach. The university of which I am an alumnus and which I represent in Parliament—Bristol university—has the ChemLabS initiative whereby academics go out to local schools to enthuse people about chemistry, as well as inviting teachers and lab technicians into the university to update them on how to teach a practical lesson by bringing chemistry to life and making it exciting for teenage students. As the hon. Members for Bolton, South-East and for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, the work that staff do in that respect, as well as their research work, ought to be recognised by their employers.

School relationships can also make an incredibly important contribution. The Committee's report refers to the review by Professor Steven Schwartz, which has still not been fully implemented across the sector. In my view, the unfinished business of the Schwarz review is particularly on post-qualification application. It is absurd that we still have a school system designed in 1870 with a term structure based on having young people available to do agricultural work in the summer. We all know that the future of our economy does not depend on that. It will be knowledge-based, and universities need more time to consider the field of applicants. Individuals also need time, once they know how they have done at school or college, to decide where to apply to. I hope that post-qualification application will be seriously considered in future.

On resources, I do not want to have the usual row that the Minister and I have about tuition fees, but I agree with the first conclusion in the Committee's report that it is a shame that the fees review is not concluding this year so that we can debate it thoroughly before the general election. The report recommends a national bursary scheme, which I certainly support. It is absurd that twin brothers—an academic Jedward, perhaps—going to different universities such as Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin, but with exactly the same family circumstances, get different bursary support. Information about bursaries is patchy, and since the Committee's report Professor Claire Callender has produced a report about the difficulty that many young people have in navigating their way through the system.

The Committee's report highlighted three areas of concern, and many contributors have mentioned them. The first was standards. I covered A-level results day for my party both this year and two years ago, and I know that there is a debate about standards every single year. In my role I meet many admissions tutors, who all say that A-levels are not what they used to be and students are not as well prepared as they used to be. However, as has been recognised in the debate, the same admissions tutors and academic departments shy away from any discussion about the number of students who go on to get a 2:1 or a first in their degree course. When I graduated from Bristol university in history 21 years ago, nobody in my peer group got a first, and it was not because we were all stupid. Not that many got a 2:1, either. Now it is quite different, so the Committee was right that we must have a debate about academic standards, and universities should not be afraid of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred to the new chief executive of the QAA, Anthony McClaran, whom many of us know from his UCAS days. I was at the same meeting as him last week and met him again the next day, and he certainly takes seriously the issue of standards raised in the Select Committee's report.

Many contributors to the debate have mentioned the quality of teaching. Students have a right to know what experience they are going to get when they go to university. It does not necessarily follow that a world-class research-based professor will be the best teacher, but students ought to know how much contact they are likely to have with that person and how much of their course is likely to be taught or monitored by a PhD or post-doctoral member of the department.

Consistency was an area of concern mentioned in the Committee's report, which brings me back to my earlier point about the need for information for applicants so that they know what to expect and can plan their lives around course expectations. That is particularly important for people with difficult family structures who are trying to access university.

The third and final concern that I am going to mention is part-time and mature students. That is unfinished business. In its final report, the old Select Committee on Education and Skills recommended that the artificial divide between full and part-time undergraduates be removed, as is the case in many other countries. Of

course, many full-time undergraduates, because of financial constraints, do paid work throughout their full-time studies, so all students are to some extent part time.

None the less, there is a financial divide between full and part-time students and it ought to be removed. The Liberal Democrats and the Government disagree about the fairness of tuition fees, but I do not understand why they cling to the distinction. Part-time students must pay tuition fees up front, in cash, while they are studying, whereas full-time students can borrow and pay back the fee debt over the years of their future careers. I hope the review of Lord Browne of Madingley will recommend that that divide is bridged.

Finally, we agree that the contribution of British higher education is going to be absolutely crucial in ensuring that this country prospers beyond the recession. We know that it is world class, but there is absolutely no room for complacency. The rest of the world is catching us up. In the context of the current recession, all other G20 countries are investing in higher education rather than proposing budgetary cuts. We need to ensure that whatever happens during this recession, we have a strong English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish higher education system beyond it, and that this country prospers into the future.

3.7 pm

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): We have had a wide-ranging debate on a wide-ranging report. It is a valuable report and I congratulate the Chairman and members of the Committee who have contributed to the debate.

We approach this subject sharing a belief in some very important principles. First, we recognise that British higher education is excellent, of a very high standard, and well regarded internationally, and we can all take pride in it. Nobody wishes to denigrate the achievements of our universities or their students and staff.

The second principle was put very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), who rightly challenged the statement that more means worse, and said that rather, more means more diverse. I completely agree with him. That captured the direction of our higher education sector very well indeed: it is becoming more diverse and we should all understand that the term "university" covers a wide range of institutions with distinct missions and characters, but—we hope—they all display the academic rigour that comes with higher education.

The third principle, which was enunciated by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson), is that the distinctive strength of universities in this country—our universities have this asset when those in other countries, including on continental Europe, do not—is the degree of autonomy that they still enjoy. We may sometimes suspect that they enjoy it despite the best efforts of Ministers, but they nevertheless still enjoy it. If the Conservatives were in government, we would do our best to try to enhance that autonomy. It is a very good principle.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Is not the English language another great asset for our universities? The current review of immigration rules, which may impact on universities, is very serious, because a big section of their income comes from foreign students.

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend makes a very important point that needs to be borne in mind.

If we start with those three principles and an understanding of the excellence, diversity and autonomy in the system, we can understand some of the controversy that surrounded the Committee, and particularly its Chairman, when the report was published.

I have been in this House for a long time with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and have always found him to be a mild-mannered and courteous Member, but he clearly got up one morning and thought, "No more Mr. Nice Guy", as he managed to say some extraordinarily inflammatory things that perhaps upset the sector more than he expected. He followed that up by summoning a range of vice-chancellors to his study, expecting them to "tell on" each other. He was waiting for the first one to break and criticise the others, and he was clearly amazed when, despite his prolonged interrogation, the Wellington square of those assembled vice-chancellors held and none of them 'fessed up and criticised the others. It was a bizarre few months with some of his investigations and the publication of the report.

I suggest to the Chairman of the Committee that perhaps the difficulties that he got into are reflected in the frustration that he clearly still feels. The very first page of his report states:

> "Vice-Chancellors cannot give a straightforward answer to the simple question of whether students obtaining first class honours degrees at different universities had attained the same intellectual standards."

The problem is that he was trying to treat university degrees as if they were A-levels. These are diverse institutions with diverse missions. There is much in the report that I welcome, but if I had a criticism of it, it is that it does not fully understand the autonomy and diversity of the sector.

Dr. Iddon: If that is the case, how does the hon. Gentleman expect employers to distinguish them?

Mr. Willetts: Employers do distinguish, and one reason why we attach so much importance to better information for students and prospective students is that they need to understand the distinctive roles of different universities. In fact, one of my frustrations is that sometimes I think that employers do not fully understand the distinctive strengths of, for example, regional universities, which can be excellent, but they are not the same as those institutions that are rivals to US ivy league colleges as global institutions. They have different roles.

Of course we expect every first class degree in any university to have been achieved with high standards and rigour, but they are different institutions that often measure different things. When it comes to academic rigour, a part of our system that is already a distinctive strength—the external examiner system—needs further strengthening. As several hon. Members on both sides of the House have already said, the big increase in the number of people getting first class honours degrees causes concern. We need to be confident that we will not face the grade inflation debate that has been such an issue for GCSEs and A-levels over the years. It would be a terrible pity if that debate took off for universities.

[Mr. Willetts]

I also agreed with the report on the importance of the student experience and information about it. We have ended up with a system that has sharp incentives to reward high-quality research, but still has inadequate incentives to reward high-quality teaching. Many students want to talk about their academic experience. They ask about the high-profile professor who was advertised in the university prospectus and whom they have never seen in their two or three years there. He or she is writing great research texts or appears regularly in the media, but has not delivered any lectures or attended any of their seminars. Those are the types of concerns that we are picking up, and when communicating with universities, we all try to convey it to them that they need to address such concerns if they are to maintain the good will of students and parents.

As an Opposition Member, I welcomed the report's very effective dissection of the Government's announcement of the 10,000 extra places, about which we pursued Ministers at the time. The report reaches a powerful but measured conclusion. It states that, after "Mr. Denham", as he was called in the report, presented the original 10,000 places, in October 2008, the

"reasonable construction that an observer would put on his statement was that there would be 10,000 places for new entrants to university, whereas the new places announced at that time boil down to 3,000 extra places for full-time new entrants."

That captures the Opposition's experience, month after month, year after year, in dealing with some of these Government announcements. It is useful to have such a clear and authoritative analysis of what was actually meant compared with what actually happened, and of course we took the analysis to heart when I, at the Conservative party conference, announced our 10,000 extra, properly funded and properly costed university places for new students.

The discussion of student numbers leads on to a question to which I hope the Minister will respond. Some universities have recruited additional students beyond the number agreed by the Higher Education Funding Council. We are intrigued to know whether he will fine the universities for this terrible offence against his planning system. A game of bluff is going on here. We have a crisis in which Ministers are deciding whether to fine universities and universities are trying to work out whether it is a bluff. It reminds me awfully of the early stages of the Cuban missile crisis when people were trying to work out who was going to blink first.

I was assured today by a vice-chancellor that he did not believe that the Government would impose any fines. We would be interested to know whether they will. They have a dilemma: if they do not impose fines, their entire structure for planning and financing higher education will be thrown into question, but if they do impose fines on universities for taking on the extra students, they will be in the unusual position of fining universities for taking steps towards meeting the Government's own public service target of 50 per cent. participation in higher education. Fining universities for moving closer to the 50 per cent. target that Ministers are willing to finance would put the Government in a very odd position. We look forward to hearing exactly what the Minister plans to do.

The report contains interesting material on part-time students. A recent HEFC study made a devastating point of which I had not previously been aware. It showed that only 39 per cent. of part-time students who began a first degree programme in 1996-97 at a higher education institution in the UK completed their degree within 11 academic years. That is a very worrying statistic and leads me on to something about which I hope to hear more from the Minister. Members on both sides of the House have been talking about the case for more part-time students, and clearly such evidence needs to be considered.

We read yesterday, however, in the pre-Budget report document about a £600 million cut in the higher education and science and research budgets. We, and many people in higher education and science and research, hope that the Minister will indicate what that means. When one looks at the components, one can see several angles on which we need more information. I shall take this slowly, because the brief four-line entry on page 110 of the report contains so many different points. It states that the cuts will come

"from a combination of changes to student support within existing arrangements".

What are these changes to student support? Will there be yet more changes in the rules for access to maintenance grants and maintenance loans? Is that what the report means? Or does it mean something else? We need to know.

The pre-Budget report also talks about

"efficiency savings and prioritisation across universities, science and research"—

I would be interested to know what those efficiency savings are—and

"some switching of modes of study in higher education".

As the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) said—we heard this on "Newsnight" last night too—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury says that that means a shift towards part-time students. How do the Government intend to achieve that shift? What changes in the financing rules will they propose? Given the evidence from the Select Committee's report, what support will the Government give to part-time students so that they do not suffer from the very high drop-out rates that we are debating today? It is a sad irony that we should have had an autumn statement yesterday that apparently proposed a cut, in a move towards having more part-time students, when we have also had a report showing that part-time students need extra support if they are to achieve the participation and completion rates for which we would all hope.

The list also mentions

"reductions in budgets that do not support student participation".

We want to know what that is. From the scientists' point of view, when the Minister talks about efficiency savings and prioritisation across universities and science and research, what will happen to the Government's previous pledge on the ring-fencing of the science budget? We would like to know whether that statement still stands. There is a lot of important information that we need to hear to have those four key lines in the PBR explained.

Finally, and very briefly, the Minister will know how devastating the report on the performance of the Student Loans Company that was released earlier this week was. Personally, I think that the report merited an oral

statement. Indeed, it was regrettable that the report was available only at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, despite the fact that the written statement said that it would be placed in the Library and made available. However, the report was not available when the written statement came out, and that statement was a rather anodyne account of what is a very powerful report indeed.

Some other hon. Members have made these points, but it is shocking that there were times when only 5 per cent. of phone calls to the Student Loans Company were answered. It is shocking that 100,000 items of evidence that were supposed to be electronically scanned could not be scanned. It is also shocking that, alongside the gross incompetence of the Student Loans Company, some responsibility clearly lay with the Department and Ministers. We should not forget that, as the report says:

"The new service, originally intended to be operational from September 2008 to coincide with the UCAS annual cycle for applications was delayed because of decisions by the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to alter the regulations governing student financial support,"

which postponed it until February 2009. Part of the "terminal 5" problem of the service, which was re-launched in a rush and without proper testing, was caused because five months were lost owing to Ministers chopping and changing the maintenance rules. I would very much like to hear what steps the Minister will take in response to the comments in the report that are addressed to the Department and to Ministers. I would also like to know whether he understands that the problems have caused enormous distress to students. I hope that he will take this opportunity to apologise to students and their families for what they have gone through.

Above all—this is my final point, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I would like to hear what will happen in future. We need to know when students who make applications in the coming year will be able to access advice and support from the Student Loans Company and when the backlog of cases that have still not been resolved will finally be clarified, resolved and sorted out by this grossly incompetent organisation. The Minister owes the House and students an explanation of that.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There has just been an extraordinary statement in the upper House concerning the eligibility of Members of the upper House to sit there. It has come to light that, as a consequence of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, there is now some doubt about whether Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens are eligible for membership of the House of Lords. There are also implications for certain other offices under the Crown, as well as for membership of the Privy Council and judicial office holders. The eligibility of Commonwealth citizens to be employees of the civil service is also in some doubt.

We have just had the most recent business statement of the Session, yet no reference was made to that announcement. May I ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you have had any indication from the Leader of the House that she plans to share with the House the Government's proposals to legislate in the current Session, in order to clarify the position and avoid any doubt about the eligibility of those citizens to be members of the upper House and to continue to hold certain other offices?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): In specific answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question, no, I have not received any message from the Leader of the House that a statement or further action is intended. By virtue of his raising this obviously serious matter on a point of order, however, note will be taken, and I hope that the House will be informed at the earliest possible date.

3.25 pm

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) for this opportunity to discuss higher education and his Committee's report. Many of us in the Chamber have had successive discussions on these matters recently—it feels like week by week. I have been a Minister for either skills or higher education for some three years now, and it is my feeling that the standard of the debate this afternoon was among the very highest. That is a reflection of the work of the hon. Gentleman's Committee, and of the real contribution that Back Benchers have made. It is also a reflection of the contributions by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson). I hope I shall be able to deal with some of the points they raised in the moments I have at the Dispatch Box, although I recognise that we have another debate this afternoon.

It is important to put this debate in context, and I think the whole House will agree that there is never an excuse for being complacent about our public services. We can count the number of lives that are changed as a result of them, and we particularly commend the professionalism of the staff, students and management in the higher education sector.

When we consider the backdrop against which the Committee reported, we can see that we now have more students in our universities than at any time in our history. We have more students from state schools in our universities than ever before, and we have more black students from less well-off families, more black and ethnic minority students, and more students expressing satisfaction with their courses, than at any time in our history. It is also right to say that British universities have achieved a higher ranking in the international league tables than ever before. All this is underpinned by a 25 per cent. real-terms rise in public spending. I genuinely hope that hon. Members recognise that investing in higher education underpins the success of all those students. We heard my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East speak movingly about the nature of that investment, and, in particular, what it means for facilities in the sciences.

The report was wide-ranging and substantial. I welcome the spirit in which the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough made his remarks, although I detected a slight difference in tone in the Chamber this afternoon from when the report was initially announced. I hope he recognises that since the Committee published its report, the Government have published their own framework for the development of higher education over the next 10 years, which is called "Higher Ambitions". I hope he will also acknowledge that we have taken on board

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some of his Committee's proposals, especially in relation to the student experience, about which much has been said today.

The student experience is not about driving students to be solely consumers of education. That is not the right fit; education is far more than just a consumer interest. But against a backdrop of widening participation and of seeking a student contribution to ensure that students are centre stage for that experience, the thrust of the report was spot-on and we sought to reflect that in "Higher Ambitions."

I did not fully recognise the bleak picture regarding quality that was presented in the report, and obviously there was tremendous concern across the sector—and some incredulity—at the way in which the report was reflected in other parts of the world, with items turning up in China, Malaysia and other places. The breadth of experience for students in higher education—the fact that it is not just about the end grade, but the range of experiences that students have—is reflected in the thrust that the sector is placing on the higher education achievement record. That is important for employers who want to understand fully the soft skills that students have, but it is also a virtue of our system. Many countries in the world recognise that the undergraduate experience in the UK is part of the cultural circumstances that surround the student and what the student engages in; it is not just about the end achievement.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said much about the proportion of firsts and 2:1s that appear in the system. With widening participation and more students in the system than ever before, is it not right to look at that as a percentage rather than pure numbers? If he does that, he will see that the proportional increase is not as large as it first appears. The proportion of 2:1s has increased from 45.5 per cent. to 48.1 per cent. over the last period. That is not as significant a rise as has been suggested. The proportion of firsts has gone up from 8.2 per cent. to 13.3 per cent.; a larger rise but, measured against the success that we are seeing at A-levels, not an overly significant one.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of the QAA in ensuring standards. The QAA—under the new leadership of Anthony McClaran, to whom I spoke this week—is conducting an extensive review of how it quality assures and, in doing so, has already sought to put students at the centre of that process. We will have student auditors for the first time from January. A student is on the board of the QAA now as a result of concerns about the student voice. I hope the hon. Gentleman is pleased also that the QAA, in that public-facing rôle—it is more than public relations—is seeking to make its work student-friendly and is revising much of its literature, using YouTube and other places where students go. I hope that that meets much of the concern raised by the hon. Gentleman.

There needs to be a further firming up of the external examiner system. I thought that the work done by Professor Colin Riordan was very good and I was pleased to be at his presentation to the HEFCE board. That work is being taken forward by UUK over the next year under the leadership of Dame Janet Finch. It is hugely important that we ensure that the external examiner is the voice of that standards agenda within the system—that they are not isolated by working in a particular institution, but can join up in a more collective and cohesive way to communicate the importance of standards. It is right to say that the Select Committee's work has contributed to that progress.

Members have raised the issue of the pre-Budget report and it is important that I put the following comments on the record. The economic downturn that followed the banking crisis has been the most severe since the second world war. The Chancellor's main task is to put the public finances on to a sound footing, while at the same time continuing to promote economic growth. The PBR is not a spending review, but it does set out where efficiency savings will be needed by 2012-13. The savings will amount to 4 to 5 per cent. of the total Government spend on higher education, science and research. When Members reflect on how hard families are finding this downturn and the sorts of savings they are having to make, I hope we will recognise that 4 to 5 per cent. is reasonable. When the Government have received the report following Lord Browne's review of higher education funding and student finance in the summer of 2010, we will make the necessary decisions about where and how these savings can best be met, and, as always, we will do so in close liaison with the relevant funding council.

The Government remain committed to our higher education system and to continuing to pay a significant share of the costs of educating each student, but the current economic situation is difficult, and as higher education institutions have benefited significantly over the last period, with some receiving funding increases of almost 50 per cent. over the last decade, it is right that they should make their contribution now.

Mr. Boswell: On the student support package, can the Minister give the House the simple assurance that students who are already receiving a particular level of support will not suffer?

Mr. Lammy: I can confirm that I do not anticipate there will be any changes in respect of students who have already entered the system. May I also put on the record our commitment to the science ring fence, and to our framework?

On the Student Loans Company, Members have described the difficulties that students have experienced with the system this year. I have previously apologised for that, and I am happy to do so again today. It is entirely right, however, that my focus should have been not on scapegoats or scalps but on setting up the review, which I did promptly, and on acting promptly in other ways when this situation was first brought to my attention in September, as well as on ensuring that the SLC got extra resources at that time to deal with the problem. I also focused on ensuring that there was an extra contact centre and that a greater volume of calls were answered, and I joined with Sir Deian Hopkin in saying that the No. 1 priority was to ensure that the lessons are learned, so that there can be significant progress as we move forward to next year's cycle.

The SLC chair has already said that its senior management team will be strengthened and reorganised. As it was the Administration of the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) who set up the SLC, I hope he will recognise that it is a private organisation, so these

matters must be for the new chair—he is a new chair—and the board to consider. Over the next short while, they must, through due process, determine how best to strengthen and reorganise the body. It is right that that should not be within the purview of Ministers.

We must look forward, and my Department must learn from this exercise in relation to its responsibilities. I am absolutely clear about that. That is why we are happy to consider more closely both risk management and the escalation of such problems up the SLC to the board and on to the Department. There have been problems, but it is clear from the strategic framework document that governs the SLC that the Department's ambit is strategic. It cannot be right for Ministers to micro-manage the processing of student loan claims. Of course I will act in relation to that one recommendation of the report, but the most important thing Sir Deian recommended was that stakeholder management and the customer experience should be much more centre stage in the SLC's operation. We have set up a new stakeholder forum on which Universities UK and the National Union of Students is represented. We want to ensure that we do not have again the problems we have had this year, and that those interests have a voice and are communicating with the board and senior management.

I remain particularly concerned about the situation for students with disabilities. It is always the case in a post-qualification application process that students with disabilities take longer to go through the assessment process, having presented their medical certification and other things, and to be assessed for the equipment they need. I was at the London assessment centre yesterday, and I spoke to staff there about the nature of that process. We currently have many such students—5,000—in the system, and there is an onus to take matters forward, but I have asked the SLC to ensure that universities are ringing around and that it is making contact with those students to ensure they move through the system.

Mr. Willetts: I am encouraged by what the Minister has just said about disabled students, as this issue is a particular source of concern, but will he explain two points to the House? First, when does he expect the backlog of current cases to be cleared? Secondly, when does he expect the SLC to be able to start the new cycle and to offer assessments for future claims?

Mr. Lammy: The chief executive of the SLC assures me that he will have got through the backlog by the end of this weekend. However, the hon. Gentleman will realise that, as up to 5,000 students are still applying for student loans week by week, there are still a number of applications to get through that are effectively new applications. On the backlog, it is important to emphasise the issues regarding students who applied within the appropriate time, and students for whom the SLC had lost material, including students with disabilities. The system has been delayed by such problems, but we should get through the backlog, and I hope to start the cycle shortly. I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that it was important that we did not start the cycle before we got the report, and before I could make sure that any newly formed management team—and, indeed the new chair and his board—have reflected on the report and taken action to ensure that we will not have the same problems next year.

Mr. Willis: In his discussions with the SLC, has the Minister received an assurance that all of the second tranche of the loans, which are payable on 27 or 28 January, will be paid?

Mr. Lammy: I have received full assurance from the chief executive of the SLC that students in the system who will have got their cheques can expect to continue to receive those payments as normal. Therefore, there will be a further payment in January, which we would expect to go appropriately.

I am encouraged by the comments of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, and he can be assured that of course I treat this matter as a top priority. I am working with the SLC to ensure that the board and chair are doing all they can to drive the matter forward, so that we have a better system next year. I assure the hon. Gentleman too that we absolutely put customers first over this three-year period. We have eradicated from the system the need for parents to submit passports or P45 forms: people can now apply online, and calls are answered without the problems that arose this summer.

This has been a good debate, and I am delighted to have had another opportunity to talk in the House about the importance of higher education.

Mr. Martlew: My hon. Friend may be coming to this, but in my speech I asked whether I could meet him early in the new year to discuss the situation regarding the university of Cumbria. Will he deal with that before he concludes his speech?

Mr. Lammy: That is a very good way for me to end my speech. I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that I am happy to have that meeting. I recognise the historic challenges in Cumbria, and particularly his championing of the area.

Mr. Rob Wilson: Earlier, I asked the Minister about the views he had given to Demos. Will he say what his comments were, and whether they were reported accurately in the press?

Mr. Lammy: As always with these things, they were reported accurately in some of the press. My position with regard to a national civic service has been absolutely clear for many years, and, indeed, the Prime Minister has made his commitment to it plain. However, that is completely different from funding such a service by effectively billing and charging students. I made it clear that I do not support that, as I think Demos fully understands. The hon. Gentleman should not confuse think-pieces with the position of the Government.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54 (4)).

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Central and Local Government

[Relevant Documents: The Sixth Report from the Communities and Local Government Committee, HC 33, Session 2008-09, on The balance of power: central and local government, and the Government response, Cm 7712.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Communities and Local Government—

(1) resources, not exceeding £17,434,832,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £17,433,673,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out. *(Mr. Watts.)*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the Chairman of the Select Committee, may I just observe that there is less time available for this debate than there was for the former debate? I will not impose a time limit but, given the numbers of hon. Members who I know wish to take part and in an effort to be as inclusive as possible, a rough tariff of about 15 minutes per person will apply.

3.47 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall try and moderate what I say to make sure that there is ample space for other Members.

I want to begin by setting the scene for the report from the Communities and Local Government Committee on the balance of power between central Government and local government. Over several decades, the pattern in this country seems to have been that of a pendulum swinging backwards and forwards. First it lurches towards centralism, then it swings back in the other direction towards localism before swinging back towards centralism again. The overall trend in the past century has been towards a reduction in the numbers of elected people, if one takes all levels together and excludes MPs, and there has also been a substantial reduction in the powers of local government. However, although that has been the overall trend, the pendulum has undoubtedly swung the other way too. Those of us who were in local government before we came to this place will certainly have experienced times when local government was even more constrained than it is at present.

I think that we need to be aware that the pendulum that I have described exists. At the moment, it seems to me that there is a willingness—or at least an expressed willingness—among all the political parties to lurch towards localism, and away from centralism. The Select Committee's report is therefore extremely timely, in that it looks at what it considers to be appropriate ways to give more power to local government and ensure that we have a much less centralised process.

Those hon. Members who have read the report will be aware that, in coming to our view, we took evidence from a number of witnesses, and that we also visited Denmark and Sweden. We made that visit because local government in those countries has a lot more freedom than is the case here, and also runs a wider range of services. It was interesting to see their system in operation and to discover that it was not quite as localised and free from central control as perhaps one might have thought from looking from the outside.

I also ought to make the point that we have received the Government's response to many of the recommendations in our report, but we agreed with the Government that we did not want their response to all of them, because at that point they were still consulting on some of the changes that they had proposed. We felt it would be inappropriate for the Government to say either that they had not come to a view and would do so at the end of the consultation or that they had come to a view when the public consultation was still going on—that would have looked somewhat odd. We have received only a partial response, but that was by agreement and we hope that the final response, including the Government's response to the public consultation, will be given at the end of this month.

I wish to go through a few of the main points in the report to set the scene. First, I wish to restate that, notwithstanding the swings back and forth in the relationship between local and central Government in England—of course, the report was considering only the arrangements in England—we have one of the most centralised systems in the whole of Europe. We discovered as we were undertaking our investigation that this is not simply a matter of local government and central Government imposing controls; it is about a whole culture in this country of centralism. We feel that that manifests itself in the way in which even though there has been a lightening up of the controls, some councils have been backward about pushing the margins and taking on the freedoms that they have. It is as if they have got into a culture of waiting for direction from the centre, even when they have the freedom to do more.

The culture of centralism certainly affects the public at large. If they were asked whether they would like more decisions to be taken locally, they would generally speak in favour of that, yet they complain if there is any variation between the service delivered by their own council and that delivered by the one next door—this is the so-called 'postcode lottery'. Of course, there cannot be increased freedom and flexibility for local councils without variations in outcome. Therefore, the public are in a bit of a schizophrenic mood about whether they really want their local council to have the freedom to decide on the level and standard of services or whether they would prefer central Government to lay down standards and their local council to be held to them.

This is also about the press and the media. The example that we cited over and over in our report was the baby P case in Haringey. I do not want to get into the details of that but, in essence, as soon as it happened, horrific though the case was, it was being discussed in Parliament, the Opposition were requiring Ministers to respond and Ministers felt that they had to respond. However, in reality, the case involved a failure at the local level on the part of the council, and the police and the local health service—they are the ones who should be held to account. The local councillors and the local council officials are the ones who should have been put on the spot by the media and by the people in the borough concerned; they should not have gone to central Government level to take people to task. Our colleagues in Sweden and Denmark said that that would not have happened in their countries; if there was a

comparable case in those countries, the national press would not demand that the Secretary of State stand up to comment.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. As a result of that case, the Badman review is taking place. It is trying to get local authorities to implement new inspection regimes on home education—that issue has been a feature of petitions in this House. Such a regime will add costs; indeed there will be a tougher regime on home educators than in respect of those on the at-risk register. We seem, again, to be going full circle, rather than allowing local authorities to sort out their own problems.

Dr. Starkey: I am not going to comment on the detail of that, because I suspect that I take a rather different view from the hon. Gentleman on that review, the proposals and the objections. However, this is an example of where a decision is being taken centrally, although it is a matter of debate among members of the public as to whether that is the appropriate place for such a decision to be taken. On child protection, the public have proved themselves to be resistant to leaving local councils to get on with it and appear to have much more confidence in central Government.

In parenthesis, in another inquiry that the Committee has completed on the Supporting People programme, it was very interesting that many of the people who gave us evidence on services for people with drug addictions, the vulnerable homeless and victims of domestic violence—groups who might be perceived to have a pretty low profile with the local electorate—were very twitchy about removing central controls. They were not confident that local councils would respond to the demands. I am not saying that they are right to be so, but that simply is a fact. The people supporting those groups had more confidence in central Government than they did in local government.

I simply want to make the point that was made to us very forcefully by Dr. Vernon Bogdanor, who is of course a constitutional expert. We asked him whether we needed a constitutional change and he said that we need a cultural change. This is not just a question of changing the rules—it is much more wide ranging than changing the rules and regulations, and who decides them. We need a huge cultural change, which it is probably a bit beyond Parliament to create. Obviously, we should do what we can.

That is the opening point that I wanted to make about the background. On the central and local relationship, it is also interesting that although the Government, in their evidence, could point out a number of steps that they had taken that appeared to reduce the level of control over local government and to start nudging it slightly towards greater localisation, the Government's assessment of how far they had gone down the road towards lightening up was a bit further down the road than the progress perceived by most councils.

The Committee effectively recommended that councils must be given much greater flexibility in the breadth and standard of services that they deliver and much greater power to vary that as well as a much greater ability to raise a bigger proportion of their income, and not to be so reliant on the Government. Let me touch on those aspects of the report, but before I do so, I want to make what might be considered a philosophical point. We were in favour of more devolution not simply because locally determined services were likely to be more responsive to local need and therefore more effective and, probably, more cost-efficient, but because we felt that it would strengthen local democracy to have much more decided locally. That itself would strengthen the democratic fabric of the country. Democracy is seamless and if people had a clear understanding of, and greater involvement in, local democracy, they would be more likely to feel that they had more of a commitment to, and involvement in, the democratic process at a national level and a regional level, if appropriate, too.

The second point about allowing councils to raise a bigger proportion of their income is that we cannot get local accountability unless we have much greater local control of income and spending. Otherwise, there is no obvious link for local voters between what they are paying in council tax and the quality and breadth of the services that they receive. At the moment, some 75 to 80 per cent. of the councils' income comes, in one way or another, from central Government grants. The relationship between the level of council tax and the quality and breadth of services is therefore pretty minimal.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): May I proffer another example? Although the devolution to London was extremely welcome, we ended up in a situation where the council tax made up only one twelfth of the revenue of the mayoralty and the Greater London authority. The current Mayor has ended up reverting to the fare-box to secure a significant hold on the finances. Perhaps if the business rates—or some element of them—had been given to the Mayor, that would have shown an even greater endorsement of the Government's ambition to devolve and to have that direct relationship between the voter and the Mayor in the control of the finances.

Dr. Starkey: The hon. Gentleman anticipates one of the specific proposals—albeit not in relation to the London Mayor—that the Committee made when we got down to the detail of our recommendations on local government income. He makes the point that under the existing system, especially when there are several layers of local government, it is extremely difficult for voters to understand exactly what they are paying for and the relationship between local tax—whatever it is—and the quality of services. In my view, the clearest form of accountability comes when someone is able to see a relationship between what they vote for, in relation to paying, and the services that they get.

On giving greater autonomy to local government, we certainly felt that central Government should reduce the number of performance indicators and specifications that they make on the detailed way in which services should be provided. We felt that the subsidiarity principle should be adhered to properly, and that local government should be given a power of general competence, if it was demonstrated that the existing well-being powers were falling short. At the time when we concluded the report, the court case on a mutual company had not concluded, and we would now say that there should definitely be a power of general competence because it is clear that the well-being powers did not deliver quite what they were supposed to.

The Committee felt that there should certainly be statutory rights for local communities to determine the way in which public services are implemented and

[Dr. Starkey]

co-ordinated in their areas. We thought that the power of councils to vary service standards should be limited, in that there should still be reasonable national minimum standards below which councils should not have the freedom to reduce services. This is a difficult issue, but we got the sense that the British public were not quite ready for councils to have complete freedom to reduce such things as the level of education provided or standards of street cleanliness. While there should be national minimum standards, however, councils should have the freedom to vary above them. Obviously, that suggests that the standards should not be so prescriptive that no reasonable council would want to vary from them one way or another. We certainly feel that councils should have oversight over the full range of public services in their area and the way in which they integrate with each other, as I shall point out when I set out our suggestions on policing and health care.

The Government's response shows that they at least partially recognise what we are saying and that they are moving in the right direction. However, I think that we would conclude that they are still not moving far enough and that they need to lighten up considerably more.

Health care and policing, especially neighbourhood policing and public health, are incredibly important local services, and there is already a degree of co-operation between local councils and those services through crime and safety partnerships. Several local authorities have pooled budgets, particularly with the NHS, and some make joint appointments. For example, my council's director of public health is a joint appointment, so there is already some joint working. However, the Committee feels that a local authority, as the only elected local body, should have much more direct control over other public services.

Specifically on health care, we suggest that where there is a coterminous primary care trust and unitary authority, the Government should consider introducing a pilot scheme that effectively gets rid of the PCT board and replaces it with the council. We recognise that that process would be relatively simple in such areas, whereas it would be difficult to introduce throughout the whole country because the boundaries of PCTs and councils are not coterminous in many places and a huge reorganisation would be necessary. However, it would be worth trying that out in some areas. We also suggest that, in the absence of such a development, the Department of Health and the Home Office should at least work much more closely with the Department for Communities and Local Government to establish local authority commissioning models for both health care and local policing.

When members of the Local Government Association representing the three main parties were asked in our evidence session about democratic control over police services, it was extremely impressive that they spoke with absolutely one voice. I understand that the one voice with which they spoke differed from each of the parties' Front-Bench policies. Essentially, that one voice said that we should certainly have local, democratic control over the police, that there is already a local, democratic body—the council—and that it should have such control. The members of the LGA were root-and-branch opposed to directly elected police chiefs and police committees. We were extremely impressed by that, and I think that we largely agreed with them.

Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government have at least some understanding of local government and some feeling for devolution to local government, but we were unimpressed by the Ministers from the Department of Health and the Home Office, who did not seem to have much understanding of how local government worked or how it impinged on their Departments. I suspect that we would have gained a similar impression had we asked for a Minister from the Department for Children, Schools and Families or any other Department.

That points to a problem: even if DCLG is signed up to devolution, it has a big job to do to persuade the Ministers and civil servants in other Departments whose responsibilities impinge on local government to take the same relaxed view; to recognise the virtues of devolving power to local councils; and to realise that devolution might lead to departmental policy delivery locally that was more effective and cost-effective than it would be if they continued to try to micro-manage it.

On local government finance, we expressed the view that the Government must consider a variety of options to increase local government's revenue-raising powers. The issue is particularly relevant, given the country's likely economic climate and the need, as we come out of the recession, to rein in public spending. Local councils should be given greater flexibility in terms of revenue-raising powers, because future extreme funding shortages, as constrained by central Government, will mean that, even if councils are given increased powers to take decisions, they will not have any effective ability to vary services; they will simply be given flexibility in terms of what to cut. Indeed, local councillors will once again be held responsible for cuts that they have no power to vary. It is therefore particularly important that we increase local government's revenue-raising powers.

On local government taxation, the Committee concluded that there should be a supplementary local income tax alongside a property tax, and a corresponding reduction in central income tax rates so that the overall tax burden remained the same. Obviously, that could not be introduced tomorrow, but it is a potential long-term solution to the balance-of-funding problem, and one that the Government should seriously consider. Unsurprisingly, they immediately responded by saying that they had no plans to undertake such a project. I shall leave it to the Minister to explain why.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Or change her mind.

Dr. Starkey: Indeed.

Mr. Pelling: Some of the Committee's proposals are very similar to those of the Layfield report. Does the hon. Lady think that the Callaghan Government's abandonment of that report was where we all went wrong?

Dr. Starkey: It is difficult to blame one set of people at one point. The fact is that, over the decades, a variety of people have, if I may describe it this way, bottled out. On the other hand, this country's experience of changing

local government taxation systems has been an unhappy one, and I can absolutely see why central Government of whatever party, having been rather burnt by the poll tax experience, take the view that minimal and incremental change is the best way forward.

Personally I think that incremental change on council tax reform, for example, could go a lot further than it has; all Governments seem to be extremely timid about the matter. To be fair, I understand that. We all know that when a system is changed, there are winners and losers. The winners take what they have got, keep quiet and carry on and the losers make a lot of fuss. It is extremely difficult. Sooner or later, however, somebody will have to bite the bullet because we cannot carry on nibbling away at the system and changing it incrementally.

We certainly reiterated the view that the Committee had taken before, which was that the business rate should be relocalised. Speaking personally again, I should say that I was on the other side of the argument in the sense that I was in local government when the business rate was taken away. It was alleged that some councils were bleeding businesses dry because the businesses had no vote. However, I recall that there was never any concrete evidence that that was happening on a grand scale. It seemed to me at the time a pretty poor evidential basis for reducing—removing, essentially—any accountability between a local council and its local businesses.

The fact that business rates are not localised means that whether there are active and successful businesses in an area makes no difference to the income of the local council, which will get exactly the same amount of redistributed business rate back. The relocalisation of the business rate is an extremely important issue.

Mr. Betts: On the issue of the business rate and how councils might misuse it if they got it back, I am sure that my hon. Friend recalls from her days in local government that when domestic and business rates were levied, there was a link between the two; councils could not increase the business rate and hold the domestic rate down. There was always that local accountability and democratic control over overall increases in rates.

Dr. Starkey: Absolutely. Of course, the Government have introduced the supplementary business rate, although that is largely for Crossrail. Schemes have been introduced that allow for business income to be raised locally against specific local projects. That has re-established a relationship between local businesses and local councils and demonstrated how local businesses benefit from local spending. Their acquiescence in contributing towards that spending is also encouraged when they know what it is for.

Unsurprisingly, the Committee reiterated its opposition to capping. When there is capping, democratic accountability between a local electorate and their local council is essentially removed and central Government try to second-guess the decisions of local councils. If local councils believe that they are delivering such a good and improved service to their local electorate that their local electorate will be willing to pay higher tax, the Committee and I felt that that is for them; if the local electorate did not agree, they would know what to do. We reiterated our view that capping should go completely.

We also considered forms of grant allocation and recommended some improvements. We were very constrained about what we could suggest in relation to Government grants. During our visit to Denmark and Sweden, it became apparent to us that the level of equalisation required between different authorities in those countries is small compared with what would be required in this country. The income difference between the poorest and richest councils in those countries is much less than the gap in this country because they are much more equal societies—partly as a result of their histories, but also because of their political systems.

When we look at the difference between our poorest and richest councils and the amount of money that needs to be reallocated through the equalisation process, it becomes difficult to think of ways in which one could reduce the contribution that central Government grant makes to local government income. We therefore contented ourselves with making several recommendations about transparency. We said that the advice and evidence that was given to the Department to inform changes in the grant formula should be made available on the DCLG website so that people could see how the formula was arrived at, the factors that had gone into it, and the advice that had been given; that the Government should do everything they could to increase the transparency of the grant allocation process; and that the maximum amount of detailed material should be published on the website. That would at least go some way towards enabling people to have a more informed debate about the outcome of the grant process instead of their being reduced to complaining, as we all have, about our own areas being funded less adequately than others without relating that to different needs.

We made some recommendations about constitutional change. We felt that it was important to enshrine the position of local government and the commitment to subsidiarity in a constitutional framework so that future Governments could not swing things back towards centralisation. We suggested that the European charter of local self-government, to which we signed up some years ago, should be put on to a statutory basis. We also said that there should be a Joint Committee of the House of Commons and the House of Lords to scrutinise and monitor legislation to ensure that none went through this House or the other House that took power away from local government, but preferably did that the other way round. Essentially, it would be like the connection between the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Joint Committee on Human Rights, but in the sense of protecting local government from further central Government encroachment.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady and her Committee on their report. In their discussions on having a Joint Committee, was any consideration given to the constitutional implications of having representatives from local government serving on such a body alongside peers and Members of the House of Commons?

Dr. Starkey: We may have discussed that, but I do not recall doing so. We were thinking that it would be analogous to the Human Rights Committee, in which case it would be much more appropriate to have Members of both Houses.

[Dr. Starkey]

I am getting the message that I should finish and allow other Members to contribute. The spirit of our report was that we wanted to get debate going; we have certainly done our best to do that within the House, but also more widely. I am grateful to all those in local government, among others, who have taken up the report and used it as a discussion document to get the debate going outside this House as well as within it. I hope that we are going to see real change.

4.18 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I think that in the light of the earlier point of order I should explain that although I am an ethnic minority immigrant from the Commonwealth, I am also a British national. Safety first! No comments about going back, please.

The Chairman of the Committee has ambled all the way through the report, so I will make my speech somewhat shorter. The inquiry looked into the long-standing sources of conflict between central Government and local government. I found it particularly interesting given my history of being both poacher and gamekeeper—or, as some would say, poacher and poacher.

In many ways, local government acts on behalf of central Government; to some degree, it subcontracts to central Government. The situation is very similar in most western democracies. It is therefore understandable that central Government would wish for some measure of control over local government. Again, that applies in most western democracies. The interest and concern arises in relation to the degree of that control. In England, central Government control is clearly excessive, in my belief, and it has increased markedly since 1997. The minutiae of control was imposed from very early on following the 1997 election. When I served on the Committee that considered the "best value" Bill, which became the Local Government Act 1999, I saw these measures being introduced with a very heavy hand. There was monitoring, audits and reports from local government to Government Departments—not just the Department for Communities and Local Government, as the Chairman of the Committee pointed out, but other Departments. In those days, of course, the DCLG was the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The best value legislation is notorious among councils, because it gave the Secretary of State the power to take over local authorities, literally.

Since 1997, councils have been loaded with targets to meet and judgments from the Government on quality, many of which have been based more on process than service quality. The current Secretary of State justified that under questioning by the Committee by saying that he believed the majority of councils in 1997 were of poor quality. He is possibly right; after all, the greatest proportion of councils in 1997 were Labour-controlled.

Hand in hand with councils struggling to manage with those central instructions, inspections and so on have come costs, which are moved on to the council tax payer. There has been a huge rise in council tax since 1997, with little change in the number of services provided. Much of it has been imposed as a result of Government audits and so on. For example, one local authority in my area is a tiny one called Mole Valley district council. A couple of years back, its comparative performance assessment was undertaken. It was a huge event for the council, and its officers, particularly its senior officers, worked on it for weeks beforehand and for the time that the auditors were there. To some degree, the council stalled as a result. It cost it £250,000, but because of gearing it cost the council tax payer £1 million, for little or no gain that I can see.

As I mentioned, one of the biggest bones of contention for local authorities is the myriad targets, and the Government have latterly accepted that there are too many. It has been a source of amusement to see the pride of various Secretaries of State as they have announced with an air of smiling benevolence that the number of targets would be reduced, ignoring the fact that the mountain of targets was put in place by either them or their predecessors in the first place. I suppose one could call it "grand old Duke of York syndrome"—march us up the pile of targets and then march us down again.

The problem, which the Committee Chairman touched on, is that although the DCLG cut the raw number of targets, a number of them were amalgamated so that there was no actual diminution. As she pointed out, other Departments went on loading on new targets. Certain freedoms have been announced recently, often with a flourish, such as in capital borrowing. However, that freedom is not really in place, because although in theory councils can borrow with much greater freedom, there is still a tight rein on grant and council tax, and therefore on the revenue side of capital. Even worse, the Government have taken away many local authorities' capital receipts and redistributed them elsewhere.

At face value, there are now only 198 national indicators. As I said, however, there are sub-indicators within them, so that figure does not give a true picture. The inspection regime has changed, and instead of concentrating on quality of service and value for money it is moving into other areas such as—I could not believe this—inspecting work force management. Councils that like to test the market for service providers are now crippled by legislative changes that make it virtually impossible for them to do that properly. Such action is now essentially a waste of money, particularly for councils with in-house services, because the system set up in law cripples potential private competitors.

For decades, local councils have worked with partners—that is the buzz word and has been for a long time—which may be private sector contractors or other public sector bodies such as the national health service and the police. I remember that before I came into the House, such partnerships were used by most of the local authorities that I knew well without mandatory statutory imposition from the Government. Now the Government are getting in on the act and setting up regulated, mandatory local strategic partnerships. They appear to have rules of engagement and require detailed assessment, with the usual flags of so-called performance all going on to a website that claims to grade councils from "good" to "poor". Once again, valuable senior council officers will spend hours of valuable time rushing around, tailed by Audit Commission officers, ticking boxes that are more about process than the situation on the ground that the public would like. To make matters worse, many of those partnerships are now going to be tied into a system that does not reflect the fact that different partners may have different, conflicting priorities. Those should, but will not, be reflected in the flags that go on the appropriate website.

There is a marked contrast between Ministers' and local governments' view of the balance of power. In fact, the tail end of paragraph 28 of the report puts that in a moderate and generous way:

"There remains a sizeable gap between the newly empowered local government that the Government believes it has established in principle, and the actual impact as witnessed at the local level."

That summarises the essence of the report. It is about time—long overdue—that central Government, whichever party is in control, get off the back and out of the pocket of local government.

4.25 pm

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) said a few minutes ago, the aim of the report was not only to make recommendations, but to stimulate debate. Hopefully, that will happen not merely in the Chamber, but outside. The Local Government Association, for example, has generally welcomed the thrust of the report. Hopefully, it will help its general push for greater powers and responsibilities for local government.

There is no doubt that Britain is one of the most centralised democracies in the western world. Certainly, the evidence given to the Select Committee was virtually unanimous—if there was a lack of unanimity, it was because the Government do not quite agree with everyone else on the matter. Putting that to one side, we took a lot of evidence that despite some moves toward greater powers, responsibilities and freedoms for local government, there had been a modicum of change rather than a seismic change since '97. Of course, we can welcome the different mood music that now comes out of the Department for Communities and Local Government. Ministers now generally seem to want to trust and work with local government.

I must tell the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) that it is nice to hear Members become very supportive of local government when they are in opposition. However, I seem to remember spending an awful lot of time, when I was a leader and chair of a committee in local government, dealing with something called compulsory competitive tendering, which I seem to remember him having something to do with when he was a Minister.

Sir Paul Beresford: As the hon. Gentleman may remember, I inherited that when I became a Minister. Just before the election, I changed the rules considerably, giving local government much more say and sway on those matters.

Mr. Betts: I will accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but the Government of the time, as a whole, had a certain approach to local government—they sought either to control it completely or to ignore it altogether. I certainly remember a White Paper on urban regeneration, which Nicholas Ridley, the then Minister, introduced, that did not mention local government at all, as though it was not relevant to local people and the places in which they lived.

The Committee also took evidence in Denmark and Sweden. It is true that inherently, all parliamentary democracies are centralised, in that Parliament is ultimately sovereign—it can choose either to use powers itself or to devolve them to other organisations. The fact is that Denmark and Sweden have chosen to devolve more powers to local and regional government. Obviously, those countries have different histories and cultures, so we cannot simply replicate what happens there in this country, but they offer examples of how parliamentary democracies, with Parliament remaining sovereign, can ensure that more decisions are genuinely taken at local level by local elected representatives.

As I said, there has been some improvement. The attitude in the DCLG has definitely improved. The approach of giving city regions more powers is a welcome step forward, and the reduction in the inspection regime and trusting local government more is helpful. Other positive steps forward include the changes that the Housing Minister is considering with regard to the housing revenue account, but an awful lot remains to be done.

We could look at how devolution in Scotland and Wales has been achieved. I certainly do not argue for, and I have never been supportive of, trying to replicate that sort of devolution in the regions in England, which are generally administrative conveniences and not real areas in the sense of being economic entities. I am much more supportive of giving powers to city regions on such matters. In the end, what matters to local people more than anything is their local council because they can see the things that local councils do—they are immediate to people. Councils are about sweeping the streets, the care of the elderly and local education provision. They are concerned with important local matters that affect people's daily lives.

In a healthy democracy, local councillors have to be allowed to respond to the needs of their local population. If they did not have that power and people felt that they were voting for representatives who were powerless and impotent and only there to do what central Government said, we would have an unhealthy democracy and people would get very frustrated and become very cynical. It is important for the health of our democracy that we get real power and responsibility down to local councillors. If we are to do that, we have to examine the whole issue of powers and how they fit within our constitution. Our constitution is, of course, unwritten, which does not make it easy to amend in the way that countries such as Sweden and Denmark can amend theirs. We also have to consider the issue of finance and the constant urge that Ministers have to interfere.

One reason why we have so many projects, so much central Government direction and so many grants for different items is that every single one is a photo call and a press release for the relevant Minister. Ministers can be seen to be doing things. Instead of saying to local government, "Here's the settlement for the year, and you can raise most of the money for yourself by various means", Ministers like to be seen to be doing things and to be involved. That is why they do not keep their hands off what are essentially local issues, and that affects the whole relationship between central and local government.

Establishing the principle of subsidiarity is important. Both Front-Bench teams are talking about moves towards a new localism and accepting the principle of subsidiarity. I have two examples that demonstrate that, whatever the general principles are to which those on the Front

[Mr. Betts]

Benches want to sign up, in practice they cannot resist taking a view on what should happen at local level. First, I am slightly worried by the care proposals that the Government are putting forward. If they are moving towards a national care service, does that mean that local councils will no longer have the freedom to deliver particular services in particular ways to people in their community? I do not know the answer, but if that is the case, I am worried that another whole section of local government services will be controlled and determined by a Minister, with local government simply as a delivery agent. That is not helpful for local democracy.

Secondly, we have just passed legislation that allows local transport authorities to decide whether they want to move to quality contracts. Indeed, we have just had a notice from the Secretary of State today that the regulations giving extra powers to do that have been laid. I welcome that legislation because it will give the choice back to local communities through their elected transport authority members about how to run bus services in their local area. I have just put a survey out in my constituency asking people what they think about local bus services and this move, and I have already had more than 2,500 responses. That is a staggering response rate and it shows that people are interested and want to have a say. However, I understand that it is the policy of the Conservatives not to allow that and, if they get into power, to reverse the legislation. That is unfortunate and it goes against the grain of the principles of local democracy that they talk about.

I accept what has been proposed in terms of a power of general competence. It probably is better than the current powers of well-being, but of itself it probably does not go far enough. It fits in with the general thrust of the Lyons report that all that we have to do is to give local authorities a bit more power to prioritise the services in their area and that will be a significant step forward. Yes, it would be a step forward, but it is not sufficient. I would like to go further.

We have had the central local concordat, but it has hardly sparked the imagination of the British people or fostered a real debate about local democracy. Can anyone in the Chamber explain what is in the concordat? It is a secretive piece of work hidden away in some ministerial drawer—and probably in a Local Government Association drawer too. It ought to be pretty important, but instead this piece of paper has been signed, pushed to one side and forgotten about.

The report also mentions the European charter of local self-government, which is supposed to be in the constitution of every country that signs it. Obviously this country does not have a constitution in quite that form, but we do have constitutional law, and there is no reason why the central-local concordat and the European charter should not be put on a statutory basis. Why not go that far? If the Government believe in what they have signed, they should put it in statute. Then we could turn to the Joint Committee of both Houses that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West suggested. It would be akin to the Human Rights Committee and could examine every piece of legislation that comes before the House to see whether it fits in with those two measures and the principle of subsidiarity.

Such a Committee would be a very healthy check, not just on the DCLG, which has signed up to the general principle and wants to get moving, but on other Departments that have not got the message. As my hon. Friend said, when we had before us witnesses from other Departments, they did not appear to get the message about local democracy. They seemed almost frightened of local government and of ceding any powers to it. Nominally, under the national health service, the Secretary of State is responsible for everything that happens in every part of the country in the health service. Clearly, that is nonsense, but legally it is where we are at. Let us put those measures into law and use them as a base from which to monitor all legislation from every Department.

As my hon. Friend said, in the report we suggested that powers could be devolved to local authorities. We could run pilot schemes under which, where local authority and primary care trust boundaries are coterminous, local authorities could become PCTs. That was a cross-party suggestion. I chaired another inquiry for the all-party group on local government, and Lord Hanningfield, the leader of the Tory-controlled Essex county council, supported that suggestion and said that Essex would volunteer to be one of the pilot councils.

There is great enthusiasm for joining up the commissioning of local health services—not the running of hospitals—with the local authority care services, not through the central mechanism of a national care service alongside a national health service, but by allowing things to be done locally. Of course, we will need local standards, and my hon. Friend is right about that. However, the public and politicians suffer from an element of schizophrenia in that no one wants a postcode lottery, but everyone wants local freedoms. Yet with local freedoms, different things will be done in different parts of the country. We just have to accept that. Central Government probably has a right to set minimum standards that everyone must follow, but some of the best services and service creation happen when people are free to develop and innovate at a local level and when other areas copy them and move on, rather than when central Government choose to be prescriptive from the beginning. That is the challenge.

We face a further challenge. We might be interested in local democracy, but it is not about creating more and more bodies, all of which appoint members through direct elections—directly elected police and health authorities, for instance—because that does away with the ability of local communities to choose their priorities. Local councils are elected and have a variety of responsibilities. They can make choices, based on their electorates and their manifesto priorities for different services, unlike what can be achieved by a series of directly elected bodies that cannot move resources between themselves.

One current criticism of the arrangements for local and multi-area agreements is that, although other Departments' officials often come to the table to join in the debate, they all do so with terms of reference dictated to them by their Departments. We do not get a real joining-up or ability to switch resources to different priorities, because each Department insists that its resources be spent on its services. That presents some challenges and some interesting ideas.

In the end we return to the issue of finance, which lies at the heart of much that we want to achieve. We can give local authorities the powers of general competence and sign up to as many agreements as we want, but in the end if central Government control 75 per cent. of the funding directly, it is a case of, "He who pays the piper, calls the tune." The Lyons report bottled out on one really important matter, although the Government's response was even weaker: how do we give more fundraising powers back to local councils? It seems obvious that re-localising the business rate is the way forward and would alter the balance between local and central Government to about 50:50.

Of course we need an element of central Government funding to deal with disparities in wealth, income and resources between one area and another. However, the calculations that we had done for the Committee in the past suggested that that element need only be about 30 per cent. of overall local government expenditure. Although Sweden has fewer disparities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, 70 per cent. of local authority expenditure in Sweden is raised locally, so a 30 per cent. target ought to be one that we should try to achieve.

We probably need a local income tax element as a top-up, but I would warn hon. Members about that. We have to be careful about a local income tax for authorities that are not allowed to borrow for revenue purposes. Hon. Members should talk to authorities in the United States and even state governments, which are currently in the most awful financial difficulties—I recently visited the Pennsylvania state government. Of course they rely on a local income tax and local sales tax, but as authorities that cannot borrow, they are making massive cuts in their budgets in this recession, so let us not get to the point where a local income tax is the only tax that local authorities rely on. Local councils in this country would be in a complete mess if we implemented Liberal Democrat policy as I think it stands, although I am not absolutely certain about that. We have to be careful on that one.

I also welcome the fact that central Government are now moving away from ring-fenced grants, so that grants can at least be spent as local authorities wish. That is right. We had an inquiry into the Supporting People programme, and people have concerns when the comforts of ring-fencing are removed, but it is right that such decisions are made locally. I remember having discussions about local government finance in the Committee some years ago when Ministers said, "Of course we want to remove ring fences". However, a few days later—this takes us back to different Departments doing different things—the Education Department, as it then was, decided that all school grants would be paid directly to schools and would not go through the local authority, thereby putting a ring fence around one of the biggest parts of local authority budgets. Again, that is the sort of thing that would be tested if agreements were put into law and a committee set up to monitor them.

Those points are the essence of the Committee's report. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West referred to this, but the idea that the tragic death of one child could become a major debate in Parliament simply astounded the people we talked to in Sweden. They could not understand how Secretaries of State could be responsible for the actions of local authority workers in one case, in one part of the country. They just did not get it. We have a completely different culture. My hon. Friend is right that the public in this country have a different perception, but perhaps they have had centralisation for so long that they have become accustomed to it. We now have to debate and raise the possibility of doing things differently and giving to local government genuine freedoms that are embodied in statute and monitored by a committee, and greater financial control to local councils. If we have that debate and move in that direction, we will have a much healthier democracy in this country than we do now.

4.43 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I have been a Member of Parliament for about 13 years. I have also served for four years as a district councillor and for 12 years on a county council, and it is my perception that local government is good and efficient, and delivers services rather better than we do nationally.

One of the key things about local government is that it is much more effective at controlling money. A perfect example of that is today's estimates day debate. We have a vast tome setting out changes in Departments, with surpluses and deficits, and money being swished and switched about. However, on estimates days we debate sport or sports centres, and so on—that is, anything but money. If we as a Parliament want to re-engage the public on a national level about the importance of MPs in these difficult times, Parliament must do something, involving this House and the other House, about controlling money.

From my experience of local government, the one thing I am sure of is that local councillors are much better at looking after money. When I was in local government, if we ever had an overspend on a budget, an officer had to explain it. I have seen a number of officers hauled over the coals because they made certain judgments or misjudged the bill for a project. Local government is much better in that regard.

We have had a series of reforms, but we always seem to get structural reforms and financial reforms out of kilter. I agree that it is vital that the national business rate be localised again, so that at least 50 per cent. of that revenue can be controlled at local authority level. It would also be rather good if the proceeds of some of the development that we have had to have in our areas stayed with local government in the form of a tariff on development. We have a lot of section 106 agreements, which need time and lawyers, and sometimes the money stays in bank accounts for donkeys' years. I would prefer a much simpler tariff system on development in which the money could be used in a variety of ways by local authorities.

A quarter of all public spending is spent by local authorities, but about 80 per cent. of it is controlled by central Government in one way or another—by specific grants, for example. We need to knock down a lot of the boundaries and put more trust in local people to deliver local services. If we did, we would have a much more efficient, effective local sector.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) mentioned primary care trusts. It has always amazed me that we have set up a separate structure to deliver primary care, as it involves important

[Mr. Robert Syms]

local issues. We could still have a national health service while allowing a great deal more involvement by local authorities. This would be a good area in which to give greater powers to local authorities, and I hope that those on my Front Bench are listening.

It has been my experience over a number of years that there has been far too much interference from not only the Department for Communities and Local Government but the Department for Transport. Doing anything relating to transport regulations requires permissions, costings, and so on. It is not so much about putting the lines on the roads as about applying for the necessary permissions to do so. We see the same thing happening in education—in relation to admissions processes for schools, for example. Everything has become too bureaucratic.

If we are serious, as a Parliament, about reviving local government and making it more important, we need to look at the way in which we put too many controls on local authorities and impose additional costs by expecting them to produce endless reports. My officers in Poole spend their money on bidding for endless things that they often do not have much chance of doing. They also spend an awful lot of time looking into whether they can do private finance initiative schemes. In this national Parliament, we ought to be aware that we need to cut down the burdens on local authorities wherever possible.

My experience is that it is better to deliver at local level. People usually feel a degree of identity. In our country, that is sometimes to a county or to a borough, to England and to Great Britain. I agree with what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) said about regions in our nation. In England, they are mainly administrative areas, although there might be a slight difference with Yorkshire—or perhaps not. People feel no great affection for a region; they are more likely to identify with their county or their borough.

People also pay attention to what goes on, but if central Government control too much—particularly in relation to money—what incentive is there for local people to turn out in any numbers to elect their local authorities? What incentive is there to get good local people back into local government? The key is to give a greater proportion of the revenue going through local authorities to those authorities and to take the hand of the Government off them.

We need to reach a stage at which national politicians do not panic whenever there is a crisis, and feel that they have to have a plan. The hon. Gentleman asked why we, as a nation, behave in such a way. I suspect that it is because we have national newspapers. Our press is highly centralised in relation to the regional and local press. Anyone following the Chancellor's pre-Budget report, for example, will see a range of papers that have been written predominantly in London. Any kind of crisis will be on the front pages and on the BBC, which still tends to be somewhat centralised in London. Other countries have not only devolved local government but have a much more vibrant regional and local press. That is certainly the case in the United States, which has a large geographical area.

That centralisation is probably one of the factors involved. The immediate question to Ministers is, "What are you going to do?", and it is terribly difficult for them to say, "Nothing, actually. I am going home to have a bath and prepare for dinner." They always have to have a plan, and the plan leads to a Green Paper, a White Paper, legislation and reports. The consequence of all that is that we end up putting burdens on local government. I do not know whether we need a constitutional mechanism to deal with that problem. We almost need a Bill of Rights for local authorities.

In Germany, the Länder are represented in the upper House. If we ever complete the reform of the next Chamber, there would be a logical argument for larger cities or counties to be represented there to temper some of the national enthusiasms that we get in this Chamber and to bring things back to questions of "What does it cost? What does it mean for local people?"

I finish where I began. I am a great believer in local government. There are some tremendously talented people in local government. There are some very good and very conscientious councillors of all parties who put a lot into their communities. As a Parliament, we should trust them more. I agree with the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West on policing and fire services. There has been a tendency to pull powers away from local authorities. Power should be going the other way, but that means that we have to accept failure and differences. If we accept that there will be bad authorities, weak authorities, better authorities and perhaps different services in different areas, we will start to have more independent local government and, in some respects, a more vibrant local government. If we do not allow failure, if we cap or if we interfere, it will level everybody down, which would be the worst solution.

There is a lot to be said for the report, which gives a great deal for us to think about. The relationship between local and national Government is crucial, and if we get it right, we will deliver better services at greater value and will reinvigorate local authorities, with more people turning out to vote and better quality people wanting to get involved.

4.51 pm

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. In the new year I shall be taking up a position as a Parliamentary Private Secretary within the Department, so this is my last opportunity to speak. I thank the Chairman for her good offices and all the guidance that she has given to me while I have served on the Committee, and I particularly thank the staff, who have done a tremendous job in drawing up the report and in getting our sometimes rambling discussions into order.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) seemed to be painting a picture of local government pre-1997 that was all sunny uplands. I was a local authority member for more years than I care to remember, certainly during the 1980s and 1990s, and that was not how I remember it. The then Conservative Government saw local authorities as theirs to command, and if they did not do as commanded, the Government abolished them, as they did with the metropolitan counties, or they starved them of funds, as happened year on year in the 1980s and 1990s. In Wigan, we had to make £10 million of cash cuts every year for three years on the trot; that was 1980s pound notes and not 2010's pound coins. We had to make a considerable reduction.

There was almost no notification whatever of those cuts. In February, we were given the figure. By April we were starting a new financial year. It was a fire-fighting exercise in which we rushed around trying to make cuts and balance the books. There is no way in which local authorities can plan properly in those circumstances. We found that programmes were being cut halfway through. Money was being wasted on those programmes and no benefit came out of it. My view of the last Conservative Government's local authority relationships is different from that of the hon. Gentleman.

On top of that, we had micro-management. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) mentioned compulsory competitive tendering. I was chair of the committee that had to implement CCT in Wigan. It reminded me of the French education system, under which every child in every school in every village in France would open their book at the same page at the same time on the same day. The micro-management of CCT meant that every council had to do everything in a certain way, and a week later they had to send out another letter and so on. It was more like a French farce than French education.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned inspection regimes. I seem to remember that inspections were brought about by the Audit Commission set up by the then Conservative Government; I checked that with my hon. Friend, whose memory is better than mine, and he agreed. I do not disagree in principle with inspections; I think it is right for local authorities to be properly inspected, and to be shown, in a proactive and positive way, where improvements can be made. However, I do not like the prescriptive system we had in the past, under which authorities that did not do as they were told got clobbered. That was very difficult.

One problem was that targets were applied everywhere, so there was no relationship with local need or a local authority's resources, but we now have a different system. Under the new regime, targets are agreed by the local authority, which means that they have relevance to the area. More importantly, because local authorities are engaged in strategic partnerships that involve people and sectors across the entire community, such as commerce and voluntary organisations, targets—whether to do with sport, industry or regeneration, for instance—are part of an overall package bringing together all the sub-partnerships. That enables councils to promote their area on the basis of targets and priorities set by the local community, which is a very different way of dealing with things.

We can now also work in strategic partnerships with primary care trusts. The Conservatives deprived local authorities of such influence in the 1980s and 1990s when they took their members off area health authorities, which resulted in a complete split between local health provision and local government provision. We have now addressed that, however. We can meet hospital and other health trusts and the family care trusts, and therefore we can draw together those elements of local government service that are particularly relevant to the broader social services.

I do not know about other areas, but in Wigan we hold regular meetings—at least six a year—with health organisations and those involved in the local economy. The local MPs are also invited and can make a contribution. That works well and enables us to have better co-ordination. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) said that her authority has a public health officer who is jointly employed by the local authority and the PCT. We have that in Wigan as well, and it serves to cement the ability of those employed in the social and health services to work together better.

There is also much pooling of resources between the two areas, so that people who are moving from social service care into health care do not fall between those two nets. There is not the problem of their being told, on the one hand, "No, you're not yet a health service problem; you're still a social services problem," and, on the other hand, social services saying, "No, her ability to look after herself is much worse, so she has to come under the health service." That happens where each service is protecting its own budget, so by pooling budgets we can prevent people from falling between those nets—or at least we can stop that happening often.

Another idea that the Government are taking forward which I warmly welcome is that of multi-area agreements, for which we have pilot schemes in city regions. In the Greater Manchester area, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities is generally recognised as being foremost among city regions in the way that it has set up voluntary relationships since the Greater Manchester council was abolished. What was important initially was that all but one of the councils were Labour controlled, but that has changed over time. I pay tribute to the leaders of all those councils, from all parties, because what has not changed is their recognition that this is not a zero-sum game. They see that if Tameside gains a benefit, it is not at the expense of Wigan but to the benefit of the whole of Greater Manchester. Therefore, all the leaders come together to ensure that Greater Manchester is seen as the beneficiary. With multi-area agreements and city regions, it is important to ensure that that approach is built into the psyche of local authority leaders. They should not see the situation as a zero-sum game, but see that something that benefits one authority in a city region will roll out benefits to the others.

We have come a long way. I accept that the Government think that they have gone a lot further than the Committee thinks, but everyone on the Committee accepts that there has been significant movement in shifting the balance of power between central Government and local authorities. There is an awful lot more to do, but I perceive a willingness in the DCLG to ensure that that shift continues. That bodes well not only for local government but for citizens.

Let me make some final points about local government finance, which, as hon. Members have said, is crucial to the relationship between central and local government. One of the best actions that the Government have taken in that regard is to introduce the certainty of a three-year system in the comprehensive spending review. That certainty of funding will allow local authorities to plan much better and to institute programmes knowing that they can carry them through. Let me make a suggestion to the Minister that I hope she will take back to the Secretary of State for discussion in the Cabinet: rather than having three-year blocks, which means that at the end of a block there is certainty only for the next year, there could be a rolling three-year programme. With such a programme, one would have some certainty in

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the first year regarding the next two years, and in the second year, one would have some indication as to what the fourth year would bring. Such a system could be used in both local and central Government to allow local authorities and Departments to plan more effectively.

If finance is crucial to the relationship between central and local government, it is important to get the figures right, particularly the balance that central Government pay to local government. I think it is a universally acknowledged truth that a council in search of a revision of formula funding is a council in search of money. We must always recognise that there will never be a perfect funding formula, as there is no such thing. The idea of a perfect funding formula is a chimera, or a holy grail that can never be grasped. However, I think that our funding formula is reasonably reflective of the needs and resources of local authorities. If that is the case, it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that the formula is put into action as quickly as possible. It cannot be right that many local authorities are massively overfunded while others are massively underfunded. The needs of Kensington and Chelsea have been assessed at £89 million under the formula, but it is receiving £104 million in Government grant, whereas Wigan's needs have been assessed at £135 million, but it is receiving only £129 million. One local authority is receiving £14 million more than it is entitled to under the formula, while another is receiving £6 million less.

I spoke earlier about the relationships between PCTs and local authorities, and unfortunately the same problem arises with PCT funding. I shall again make a comparison between Kensington and Chelsea and Wigan. Kensington and Chelsea needs £277 million but gets a grant of £337 million, which amounts to overfunding of £60 million. Wigan needs £537 million but gets £512 million in grant, which amounts to underfunding of £25 million.

Adding together £6 million and £25 million makes a total of £31 million. That is the amount that the Wigan authority is not allowed to spend—last year, this year and next year—on the services that it wants to provide. Another way of looking at it is that it is money that is being taken out of people's pockets and, given Wigan's population of 300,000, that is a lot of money per head.

That brings me back to the earlier point about the existence of a postcode lottery. It is clearly very much easier for a place like Kensington and Chelsea, which is getting so much more funding than it is entitled to, to reduce council tax or increase services, or do a bit of both, than it is for a place like Wigan. People ask why Wigan does not have the same services as other authorities, but they have no knowledge of where we stand in relation to the funding formula and the amount of money that we get. It is extremely important that the Government move forward as quickly as possible on funding.

I do not want to return to the huge cuts that we used to get in the 1980s. Because of my experiences then, I am a big supporter of the damping process and the floors and ceilings that have been introduced, but the pace of change in funding for family care trusts and local authorities is far and away to slow. Speeding it up would help local authorities, and ensure that citizens were being treated fairly.

One last point on the financial history is that we surely have to recognise that council tax is inherently unfair. That is what it was designed to be, and one of the few achievements of John Major and his Government was to make sure that it was. It is quite wrong that a person who lives in 25-bedroom mansion should pay only three times as much council tax as a person who lives in a two-up, two-down terraced house. That is not the right way to organise finances. The Lyons review was at least an opportunity to open the debate about that, although my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe suggested that it was a lost opportunity. The Government's response was far too timid, and we need to look at ways of ensuring that many more bands are introduced and that there is a much fairer relationship between bands. Finally, it is essential to have constant revaluations of houses in the council tax system, to ensure that the system does not get into the same untenable state that characterised the old rates.

This is an excellent report. I am glad that I was able to contribute to it, and sorry that I will not be able to help my colleagues on the Committee in compiling further reports for the House. I believe that this is an extremely important area, and it is one that I feel very strongly drawn to.

5.8 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be able to take part in this debate. I apologise for not being here at the start to hear the remarks made by the Committee's Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), but I was taking part in the Westminster Hall debate on pensioner poverty, a subject that is undoubtedly linked to this one. Although I will not spell those links out, I think it fair to say that two very interesting debates have been arranged for this Thursday afternoon.

I shall keep my remarks very brief, but I am delighted to be able to say a few things on this topic. My starting point is the fact that, when it comes to the relationship between central Government and local government, all is not well in the kingdom of Denmark. I want to turn these relationships on their head, because like my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner), I have a long history of involvement in local government. I am still a councillor in Stonehouse town council and I have much to say about how I admire what this first level of government does. It is often left out of all our discussions on local government, but I wish to put it on the record that we underestimate what parishes and community government can bring. I shall say something about that in a few minutes' time.

I want to turn this on its head, because although it is easy to blame central Government for all the ills that local government feels have been done to it, local government has much to answer for in its timidity in failing to stand up to central Government. In my 30 years of involvement with local government, it has often been too easy to blame the centre when local government could have done more to reform radically what is happening and to address the loss of power and responsibility.

That situation is potentially linked to the changes in structure and the movement towards a cabinet and scrutiny system. Such a system is not intrinsically wrong; what is wrong is the way in which many councils tend to

operate it. They tend to believe that once they have a cabinet system, their councillors have inherent powers that they accrete to themselves and, thus, other councillors can do nothing about that. Other councillors ought to use their scrutiny powers more. However, one of the failings occurs when a dominant political group appoints itself not only to the cabinet, but to the chairs of the scrutiny committees. Such an arrangement is wrong; just as we have a balance of power here, it ought to operate properly in local government. It is simply a scandal that a dominant grouping can use its own people in such a way as to not scrutinise what it is doing.

One thing that is wrong and that needs to be changed is that the professionalisation of local government has excluded, rather than included, a lot of people. There are those who argue that we should never allow people's means to enter into the question of whether they can stand for election as a councillor, but we have gone to the other extreme whereby their income is entirely dependent on whether they keep their seat. That should not be the way of it; people should go into local government because they believe in public service and want to serve their communities, not because it is a paid form of employment. It is sad that the question of money is entirely bound up with that of whether people stand for election and try to keep their seat.

Sir Paul Beresford: The situation is more difficult than that, because the power of the elected leader of the group over his cabinet is extreme as a result of the finances that accrue to those other cabinet members.

Mr. Drew: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not wish to cast aspersions or try in any way to wish even more problems on Stroud district council, even though it is run by those with a different political persuasion from mine, but I should say that the groupings on that council have that problem. The Conservative group is split according to who has got a position and who has not. This is a worrying development and we need to see it as a whole, because it causes great disillusion among the local populous when they see that people apparently get elected because of the associated money. I regret that we have seen that happen. Local government could revisit the issue and do something about it. It does not have to have this system imposed on it, and it might feel that it wants anything but that.

The point about the public service ethos is referred to in the Library debate paper, and from memory, I think it is in the very good report from the Communities and Local Government Committee. It concerns the payment not only of councillors but of staff. We are now completely out of kilter with what some chief executives and senior council officials are paid, and that needs to be revisited quickly. If we must navel gaze at our own situations, it is only right and proper, in the light of the bonus culture, that others should re-examine what they can expect, morally as well as financially. Some of the salaries that are now being paid have achieved the opposite of what I would have liked—they have destroyed the public service ethos, rather than supporting it.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) would be staggered if I did not take this opportunity to mention the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. Some of us feel that it is a move in the right direction, because it is about re-introducing localism. I caught the end of what my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, and we need to recognise that we cannot isolate local government from other aspects of the statutory and voluntary sectors. It is only right that the Sustainable Communities Act should be linked in with what the Government are doing with Total Place, which I find very exciting, to try to find an overall approach to the way in which we govern local areas. That must make its way through the morass of difficulties, which we all know about. If we can get it right, we will get a much clearer system for the accountability of local decision making, which can be made properly accountable, rather than being seen as local administration.

I welcome the efforts that are being made. I know that the Secretary of State makes many speeches nowadays about our planning and consideration of local spending reports. We can argue about how that is being done and whether it is being done quickly enough, but if the work of Tim Berners-Lee and Professor Nigel Shadbolt can be applied so that we can track funding appropriately and begin to share it in a different way, money can be saved. I am not interested in saving—I am interested in much more effective and efficient use of service provision. If we can do that, that will be very exciting. I think the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) has chosen the "sustainable communities Act mark 2" as his private Member's Bill. I shall be a sponsor of it, as I think he has stolen the Bill that I promoted. I am only too happy to lend it to him.

I want to make two more points, and then I shall not detain the House any longer. It is about time that we took a grown-up approach to moving forward the structure of local government. I ask those who think that it is quaint to have three-tier local authorities and who have moved to unitary authorities in their own area to please revisit the issue. We should have a structure that is fit for purpose for the 21st century.

We need some form of regional government in this country. It can either be unaccountable—as it was under the last Conservative Government—or it can be made more accountable. I have enjoyed being on the South West Regional Select Committee. It is a lonely existence, particularly because if I go out of the room, the whole Committee is disallowed because it becomes inquorate. We need to recognise that some form of regional accountability and scrutiny is necessary, and those Select Committees have, in their short existence, already done some invaluable work.

We need to move forward. We need clarity about proper strategic local government delivery, which I hope can be done through unitary authorities. If Cornwall can do it, please can Gloucestershire follow suit one day? We are so far out of the loop now and so far behind the times that it is just embarrassing. That would give greater powers to parish and town councils, which can be the delivery arm in many respects, and that would differ from the situation at the moment in which we are squabbling over who repairs the pavements. If hon. Members can explain who has responsibility to any member of the public, they are a better person than me, because all three layers of government squabble over a number of responsibilities, and that is not a happy situation.

During the summer recess and beyond, I conducted a survey on some of the reforms proposed by the Wright Committee—I was glad to have been elected to serve as

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one of its members. One of the questions in "Up for Debate", as we called the survey, asked whether the general public wanted local government to get more power and funding. That question produced one of the most disappointing responses, because there was strong opposition to giving more power and funding to local government, but that shows how far we have to go to rebuild local populaces' trust in their local government. We received 7,000 replies to the survey, so we heard from a fairly good cross-section of the Stroud constituency, but the results show that local government is unpopular and not trusted. Although it is easy, as I suggested at the start of my speech, to blame the centre for that, local government must do a lot more in its own right to rebuild trust. I hope that the Committee's report and what happens on the back of our debate will go some way towards achieving that.

5.21 pm

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a shame that more hon. Members have not had the opportunity to participate in this important debate, but pressing business is taking place elsewhere. However, those of us who have been able to discuss the report and hear colleagues' contributions will feel that we are getting to the heart of what government ought to be about: dispersing power and involving people in the decisions that affect them.

The report presented by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on behalf of her Committee makes several key recommendations. It is clear that the Committee's work on several areas all relates back to the fundamental points of how local government works, its relationship with central Government, and its ability to deliver on local people's agendas.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) gave us a history lesson although, as we heard from other hon. Members, it seemed to begin in 1997 and there is a tale to tell from before that. However, I accept some of the hon. Gentleman's points, especially about the burden that targets and the inspection regime have placed on local authorities. He had less to say about capping, the centralising of business rates and other measures that were introduced on his party's watch during its time in government, but we move on, and I hope that the Labour and Conservative Front Benchers will be able to reassure us that they are looking at those things anew.

The speeches made by Labour Members with a long experience of local government showed that there was no recent golden age because problems have been faced over some time. However, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said, there has been a centralising tendency, so we urgently need to rebalance that and to bring back a sense of freedom to those who are engaged in local government. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) said that people, sadly, sometimes have low regard for local authorities. That is a function of the way in which local authorities are unable to deliver on aspirations as they would like, because they do not have the necessary powers, and also arises because there is a lack of transparency and no link between funding and accountability, which has been a key aspect of our debate.

I am delighted to say that a lot of what is in the report has been my party's policy for a long time. I point that out not to say, "I told you so," but because if a group of distinguished Members considers the evidence and comes back with a set of policies that concur with the ones I promote week in, week out, that is a nice place to be. I accept that the Committee does not agree with us on every matter, because there were a few problems with local health boards and elected responsibility for police oversight. I accept what the hon. Lady said, and, as she heard from Liberal Democrat councillors, I recognise that democratic accountability is still the subject of debate in our party, even though our policy is moving in that direction at the moment. The issue stems from the need to get around, at least initially, the problem with the public's perception of local authorities. However, if we introduce democratic accountability, first, to the local health service, longer term there may be opportunities to bring in other measures.

I certainly support a power of general competence, and I was very pleased to hear the hon. Lady say that in light of recent events, the Committee's position would have been stronger had it issued the report today. That is welcome, because such a power would clearly demonstrate that local government was able to innovate, consider local factors and come up with solutions. Currently, without that power or the freedom to be more innovative on finances, whatever the priorities that are identified locally, there are real limits on how much can be done to meet them.

Finance issues were raised, and I was pleased to hear that the Committee wanted to re-localise business rates, because, again, the Liberal Democrats have argued for that for a long time. We need to consider the issues associated with equalisation, because some local authorities will do very well out of it. However, that measure would restore the connection between what is going on in the local economic sphere and what the local authority is doing. It would be a huge step in the right direction.

I was also interested in the fact that the Committee favoured a form of local income tax, if only on a supplementary basis to council tax. Although my party has favoured a local income tax for some time, we have been up front in saying that it could not be done overnight. It would take a long time to introduce and enact in a way that did not cause huge upset to the delivery of public services locally. However, we are sticking to that aspiration, and we want to introduce it.

Mr. Betts *rose—*

Dan Rogerson: I sense that the hon. Gentleman is ready to jump in on that point.

Mr. Betts: The hon. Gentleman tempts me, and I thank him for giving way. It is interesting that local income tax is now an "aspiration"—I heard the word—but how long is a long time? Does he accept, moreover, that if local authorities had to rely on a local income tax for their major source of funding in the current economic circumstances, many would be in deep financial difficulties?

Dan Rogerson: When I say a long time, I am not talking about decades but, ideally, within the period of a Parliament. It might take longer than that, as the experience of Scotland is showing—whatever the aspiration might be to introduce a local income tax there. Nevertheless, I would certainly want to look at local pilots as a way of

bringing forward the proposal. I accept that with all taxation systems there are winners, losers and issues to address, but we must tackle the fundamentals of equity and inequity, which the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) mentioned, and the problems of the current council tax system. In my party's view, the council tax system is not delivering and is not fit for purpose.

I was also pleased to hear the hon. Member for Wigan mention revaluation. My party would rather this country did not stick with the council tax system, but if we do, revaluation is the logical way to keep it relevant. That presents a problem for parties that want to stick with council tax but either put off revaluation or argue that it is unnecessary.

Mr. Betts: When the hon. Gentleman answered—half-answered—the question in my previous intervention by saying that a long time is not decades, he did not address the buoyancy of a local income tax during an economic recession. If people's incomes fall and people lose their jobs, there will be a real problem for an organisation that relies for its main source of funding on a local income tax, particularly when compared with council tax, which is fairly stable despite the current economic difficulties. Is that not a fair point? How does he answer it?

Dan Rogerson: That is a fair point. Obviously, there need to be equalisation measures. As the hon. Gentleman has said, if unemployment was rife in particular parts of the country, they would be worse affected by a falling off of incomes. Such things would need to be reflected in the formula. However, I do not consider that an argument for discounting local income tax altogether, and I am pleased that the Committee was prepared to consider it as a supplementary local taxation system.

In her introductory remarks, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West was giving marks out of 10 to other Government Departments in respect of how they engage with the issues in the report. That is crucial, too; we have to have a commitment right across the Government to agree that local government plays a vital role in delivering services—sometimes on a sort of agency basis, as other hon. Members have said, but, I hope, increasingly in their own right and as part of a constitutional set-up. Unlike most democracies, we do not have a written constitution, but I hope we will make the move to having one; during my political life, that has been at the heart of what I want to see as part of constitutional reform. That could allow the position to be set in a more concrete way.

I noted that the recent publication "Putting the frontline first: smarter government" took the opportunity to discuss the proliferation of quangos and the amount of public money that they spend. At the moment, it seems that the solution is to merge and amalgamate quangos. We will wait to see how that agenda develops, but that would not get us around our need to bring some of the funding to local authorities, which are well equipped to spend the money and be accountable for it. The Local Government Association has been giving traffic-light markings to quangos, which shows that it is keen to discuss how it could do more to influence how quangos deliver spending locally.

I appreciate that I am moving slightly off the subject of the Committee report, but it is important to see how things are perceived right across the Government. There are a few gems in "Putting the frontline first"; for example, I love this:

> "We will align the different sector-specific performance management frameworks"—

that sentence, of course, is a fantastic way of engaging people and increasing understanding. On the issue of quangos, the document states:

> "We will, as a first step, rationalise the ALB landscape".

If we want to encourage people to engage and feel confident that they can have a role, we need to make sure that things are as accessible as possible.

We have to hear from the other Front Benchers. In conclusion, the report makes a great contribution to our debate. It is a shame that in their response, the Government do not pick up on as many of those issues as we would have liked. The clock is ticking, of course, on their ability to respond—at least in this Parliament; we will see what happens in the next one. I am pleased that the members of the Committee have undertaken this work and presented it to Parliament and Government in this way. It takes us a little further forward.

5.33 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Like the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson), I think this has been a useful, interesting and thoughtful debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) and her Committee on their report. It is interesting and raises a number of important and serious issues. It is a shame that more Members have not come to participate in the debate. I am sure, however, that what has been said will be circulated and come to the notice of people beyond those who are in the Chamber this afternoon. It deserves that.

Virtually all of us in the Chamber today might be termed "local government usual suspects", because we all have a background and track record in it. Most of us would probably say that we were unashamed local government enthusiasts. Part of the task for those of us who willingly wear that hat is to persuade to our point of view many other hon. Members and people outside the House who may not have our direct experience of the value of local government and the efficient and effective way in which it delivers many crucial public services.

The report and the debate are worth while on several levels. All hon. Members who have spoken have followed the tone of the report. They have a wealth of experience, and they made some very constructive points. Although I might not agree with them all in detail, it is striking that there were several themes on which Members on both sides of the House could find a degree of commonality—an awful word that sounds rather as though it has come from a DCLG report.

I do not think that we will ever reconcile entirely the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) as regards the historical background. I was in local government at much the same time as both of them. However, we can all see that there has been a kind of ratchet effect of centralisation that goes even further back, almost to the post-war period. If Professor George Jones and others came along to give evidence,

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we would probably get some alternative starting points. There is a cumulative effect that often occurs when individual initiatives seem to make sense at a particular time in a particular set of circumstances. That has created what is generally accepted as being the most centralised of all the advanced western democracies. The fact that there is pretty much common ground on that view among informed opinion is an important step forward in our seeking to move forward and address it.

Let me go through some of the issues raised by hon. Members, starting with the point made by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West—and by the hon. Members for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) and for North Cornwall, among others—about the power of general competence, which I firmly support. The Government had taken the view that the power of well-being was adequate, but events demonstrated that whatever the intentions behind it, it was inadequate. In particular, the judgment in the London Authorities Mutual Ltd case, which was not available at the time, has shown very clearly that the power of well-being is not enough to give local authorities the degree of legal competence that they need. At the time when the Bill that became the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 was going through the Commons, the Government did not support Opposition proposals to amend it to create a power of general competence. I have had the opportunity to listen to the Minister talk about this in the past, but I urge the Government to reconsider it in the light of the developments in the LAML case. I think that if they did, they would have the support of all major parties in the House.

The power of competence is a key issue, but there is a general lack of power in other respects, with a needless degree of micro-management of local authorities. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) talked about local authority internal governance structures. I do not entirely agree that the unitary option is necessarily always the answer, but I do not have a problem with the patchwork quilt approach, to some extent. However, I share his concern about the straitjacketing of local authorities into certain limits in relation to their own internal governance arrangements. Not everybody would want to return to the committee system that most of us grew up with when we were in local government, but that option should be available.

I have never been fully convinced by the argument that the fairly rigid form of cabinet governance for all but the very smallest local authorities is absolutely necessary and has to be imposed centrally. When I was a fairly senior member of my London borough council and when my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley was leader at Wandsworth, I suspect that most big authorities—including Wigan, no doubt—had, in effect, a cabinet system. Our cabinet system comprised the leader and the committee chairman; we got together and drove the policy agenda and gave the officers direction. The slight difference was that we had to get matters through our committees and take at least our own group with us, but we could achieve political direction without having to go through the rigidity of imposing a cabinet structure. If we are serious about giving local authorities back power in their own house, one modest but pretty obvious thing to do is say that it is up to local authorities to determine their internal arrangements. Similarly, where are there are third-tier councils—parish and town councils—it ought to be open to the local authority to determine the delegation and consultation arrangements. A measure of internal freedom is consistent with my party's position and the Select Committee's report. I hope that the Government will take that on board earnestly.

There is concern about intrusive inspection arrangements, which have grown significantly. The Local Government Association has published a couple of important documents recently on the cost of the inspection regime. Each regime succeeds another. At one time we had compulsory competitive tendering, which the hon. Member for Wigan mentioned, and we now have comprehensive area assessments. Each regime brings its own burdens, and depending on where on the spectrum one comes from, one may like or dislike a particular regime, but the costs are real. The LGA has calculated the costs to local authorities of reporting upwards at something like £2 billion, which is a significant burden. The emphasis should be on reporting downwards to their electors.

Sir Paul Beresford: I have read the report, or a report on the report, and it suggests that there could be savings of £4 billion to £5 billion annually.

Robert Neill: That is entirely right, and compared with the total costs of reporting that is modest and achievable. I hope that the Government will take the opportunity of this debate to welcome and take on board that report, which is consistent with their own "Smarter Government" document and could be seized upon and worked with. My hon. Friend makes an important point, because the LGA is a cross-party organisation and its report comes from local government practitioners. I hope that it will be taken on board.

Linked with that is a matter on which I agree with both Labour Members and my hon. Friends, which is the fact that we should not regard a postcode lottery as always indicating a problem. It is undesirable if it is the result of arbitrary allocations, but where a difference in out-turns is the result of an informed, democratically driven decision, it is something not to condemn but to praise and encourage as it reflects the working of local democracy. An important cultural shift needs to be taken on board, and I am glad that it was addressed in the Committee's report.

Another real concern is the growth of the quango culture, which, again, has happened under Governments of both persuasions and over a period of years. The number of unaccountable agencies, and more to the point the degree of public spending that they take up, has grown exponentially. That is now a real obstacle between the elector—the informed and interested resident—and the governance systems, central or local, intended to represent them. I have seen one estimate that there are 1,152 quangos, including the small regional ones. There are a massive number, and they administer something like £43 billion.

I saw an interesting figure, I believe again from an LGA source, that of every £7,000 of expenditure, only about £350 is spent by democratically accountable bodies. That indicates the degree to which we have slipped into a form of centralisation and unaccountability. Many of the functions of quangos could readily be carried out

by local authorities, and I hope that we can look forward to finding consensus between the parties as a means of achieving a transfer of many of those functions back to democratically accountable bodies. Examples have been given by Members of all parties, and many of us who have worked in the field know that greater alignment of the working of primary care trusts and local authorities could produce significant benefits. There is no doubt that good local authorities could take on valuable roles in commissioning, particularly in the local public health services. The question of acute hospitals is different, but a natural synergy could be achieved with good will and collaboration. That might not only save money, but get better results for the resident and the patient. That is significant.

Linked to that, we could simplify the number of funding streams and agencies that local authorities have to deal with. I have looked at some of the detail. It is striking that in Durham, there are 47 funding streams for social housing. How is anyone going to navigate their way through that? In Luton and Central Bedfordshire—one established and one new unitary authority next door to each other—there are 49 different public sector agencies. Such proliferation gets in the way of making government either joined up or comprehensible to the citizen. The alternative is to concentrate those agencies wherever possible—the obvious place to do that is in the democratically accountable forum of the local authority. If the Minister indicates that the Government are prepared to move in that direction, she would certainly find support elsewhere in the House.

I want to give the Minister ample time to respond to this very useful and constructive debate. I am very impressed by much of what has been said. There are some areas where more work needs to be done, but I hope we will have the opportunity to continue to raise local government issues. Sometimes we do that in rather technical terms, in relation to finance settlements and so on, as we did earlier in the week, but in a sense, they are but the mechanisms by which we try to drive the broader agenda of making services responsive to the needs of local communities. That is why the topics we have debated today are particularly important.

5.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Barbara Follett): I thank all the members of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government for this timely and relevant report on the balance of power between central and local government in England. Since the Committee first raised the issue, at least three Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government have had the chance to comment on it—I am happy to be the fourth.

First of all, despite the somewhat discouraging comments made by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), I believe that very significant progress has been made over the past 12 years in the move away from centralisation. Such centralisation has happened for more than a century, as other hon. Members pointed out, and in many levels of government—it applies not only to the relationship between local and central Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), the Chairman of the Committee, alluded to centralisation in her speech and made some telling points on the need to balance it with the variable delivery on the ground that could happen without it. That is at the heart of the problem that we are addressing today. Centralisation was at least in part driven in an attempt to reduce variation in delivery and increase accountability in the public services, which make such a huge difference to the lives of everyone in this country. The public services that local government delivers are the ones that make us angry or happy—they are the ones that touch our lives most personally.

I pay tribute to the way in which local government has risen to the recent downturn. Specifically in the region for which I have ministerial responsibility, the East of England, but also across the country, I have seen the magnificent response by local authorities as they rally round to help individuals and businesses at this very difficult time.

Sir Paul Beresford: I did not mention it, but several Labour Members did, pointing out that if there is a certain minimum level, variations could and should be the choice of the local population and the local authority. I think that the Minister is wrong on that point.

Barbara Follett: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that variations up to a certain point can and should be the choice of the local authority, but it is the extent of those variations and people's varying expectations that were alluded to in the debate.

Over the past 12 years, after an initial period that hon. Members have rightly categorised as intensive and centrally directed targeting—designed to get services that in many cases were of varying quality to come together and for agreement to be reached on what quality was—central Government are changing gear and reducing the number of strategic performance measures and re-emphasising the importance of local leadership and local decision making. As a result, councils have been given greater powers and freedoms and, thanks to the first ever three-year settlement, greater financial stability.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner), whom I look forward to welcoming to the Department in the new year, recognises the benefits of this settlement and I am sure that he, like me, will discuss the benefits of rolling settlements with the Secretary of State in the new year.

We have also reduced ring-fencing and devolved powers, which, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew)—once a member of my local authority, Stevenage borough council—will agree, has allowed the proliferation of parish councils. That can only be a good thing. In my own constituency and region, they have really grown and begun to flex their muscles locally. These increased powers have also led to councils making and enforcing some byelaws and getting increased choices in the democratic processes, both electorally and on leadership matters.

As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) will be glad to hear and as he knows from previous interactions with me, discussions on the general power of competence are ongoing within Government. Although they are at a very early stage, this space is definitely worth watching. We are also looking at ways in which councils can raise money for specific local

[Barbara Follett]

economic projects, and a great deal of work is being done—as yesterday's pre-Budget report alluded to—on ways in which councils can raise money with things such as tax increment financing, renewable heat and light incentives and feed-in tariff revenue streams.

Most recently, the Government introduced the Business Rate Supplements Act 2009, which only received Royal Assent last month, so that county and unitary authorities and the Greater London authority could retain the proceeds of a supplement levied on their business rates to invest in additional projects aimed at promoting economic development—I emphasise the words "economic development"—in their area. As some hon. Members mentioned, we have also introduced the business improvement districts.

We have given local councils an enhanced role in leading their communities, shaping their area and bringing their public services closer together. Indeed, since 2007, we have given this co-operation a statutory underpinning in the shape of local area agreements. Despite the remarks of the hon. Member for Mole Valley—in future we should call him the grand old duke of Mole Valley—we have reduced the performance management burden on local authorities, working alone or in partnership, by reducing the national indicator set to a suite of 188 measures and setting a cap of 35 on the designated improvement targets set by local area agreements. In 2011, we hope to review and consult on the indicators set and to reduce their number even further, and under sustainable communities legislation, citizens can put forward proposals for change in their areas through their local councils.

Alongside those improvements, we have introduced extended scrutiny arrangements to give local councils and their electorate a powerful tool with which to influence the decisions that affect their daily lives. Measures in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 will further extend those, and we will use the Act to change the law to allow local authorities, and other "best value" organisations, to enter into much-needed mutual insurance schemes. In those and many other areas, the Government have demonstrated regularly how seriously they take their relationship with local government. Our ratification of the European charter of local self-government in our first 12 months in office is a good illustration of that commitment. The central-local partnership and the joint signature of the central-local concordat in December 2007 are further clear indications of the value that the Government place on their special relationship with local government.

The debate about the balance between central and local government is not, however, just an academic exercise; as I said earlier, it is about getting the highest quality services for local people. That is where the Total Place approach, as outlined in this week's White Paper, entitled "Putting the frontline first: smarter government", will help to make a real difference on the ground by giving local areas more control over what they spend their money on and by reducing burdens, especially where the cost of national performance monitoring, assessments and data collection outweighs the benefits to local areas.

Once again, and despite allegations, we have made a very serious attempt to reduce burdens, and I hope that in putting the front line first, we will go even further through the commitments to reduce burdens. Our measures to put the front line first will go hand in hand with a new drive to make more comparative performance data public and to allow the Government and the people to hold service providers to account for the safety, quality and cost of the services they provide. The new comprehensive area assessment, also announced this week, has a part in that openness and transparency. Unlike its predecessor—the comprehensive performance assessment—the CAA focuses on outcomes delivered by councils in partnership with other local service providers, rather than just on the performance of individual councils.

Despite councils in some areas performing very well, internally and externally, some areas have been flagged up—for example, my county council of Hertfordshire and the provision of social housing—as causing concern. Those areas have been given a red flag. Making data available to the public empowers the public. Total Place is a revolution and will revolutionise how we deliver public services locally, regionally and nationally. We are looking at a huge change, some of which I have seen beginning on the ground. And it works!

Places such as Margate are delivering a comprehensive range of services through the portal of the local library. People can go and talk about refuse or their housing benefit, or attend a sexual health clinic while simultaneously taking their children to the local library. I am glad to say that the number of children attending that library has trebled over the past few months. We are making a huge assessment of assets in areas such as Kent. It is this kind of drive—

6 pm

Debate interrupted, and Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54(4)).

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54 (5)).

VOTE ON ACCOUNT, 2010-11

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—

(1) resources, not exceeding £9,653,466,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £11,071,732,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out.

Department for Communities and Local Government

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011, for expenditure by the Department for Communities and Local Government—

(1) resources, not exceeding £17,434,832,000, be authorised, on account, for use as set out in HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £17,433,673,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs as so set out.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

ESTIMATES, 2009-10 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2010, an additional number not exceeding 400 all ranks be maintained for Naval Service and that modifications in the maximum numbers in the Reserve Naval and Marines Forces set out in HC 7 be authorised for the purposes of Part I of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES AND NEW ESTIMATES, 2009-10

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2010—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £6,617,232,000, be authorised for use for defence and civil services as set out in HC 18 and 24,

(2) a further sum, not exceeding £23,998,577,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, to meet the costs of defence and civil services as so set out, and

(3) limits as set out in HC 24 be set on appropriations in aid.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

ESTIMATES, 2010-11 (VOTE ON ACCOUNT)

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2011—

(1) resources, not exceeding £191,087,107,000, be authorised, on account, for use for defence and civil services as set out in HC 14, HC 19, HC 21, HC 25, HC 27 and HC 33, and

(2) a sum, not exceeding £190,506,334,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs of defence and civil services as so set out.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Liam Byrne, Mr. Stephen Timms, Sarah McCarthy-Fry and Ian Pearson introduce the Bill.

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Mr. Stephen Timms accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the service of the years ending with 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2011 and to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the years ending with 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2011.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 14 December, and to be printed (Bill 12).

Business without Debate

REGIONAL SELECT COMMITTEE (LONDON)

Motion made,

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Andy Slaughter and Mr Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITIONS

Badman Report (Poole)

6.3 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): The petition is presented on behalf of very concerned parents who electively home educate their children and who are concerned about the Badman report and its implications for their undertaking of that education. I do not intend to read out the petition, as many similar petitions were presented earlier in the week, but it joins a long line that will eventually lead, I hope, to the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Poole parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000568]

Badman Report (Uxbridge)

6.4 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Uxbridge that is in the same vein as that presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and all those that were presented earlier in the week.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Uxbridge parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000624]

Badman Report (Blaby)

6.4 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): I beg to ask leave to present a petition on behalf of 28 petitioners in my constituency of varying ages who are similarly very concerned about the Badman report on home education. I share many of their concerns.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Blaby parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000459]

British Nuclear Test Veterans

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

6.4 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): When I called for a debate on nuclear test veterans, I did so purely as a constituency MP. I wanted to highlight the case of a constituent of mine whom I have been helping for more than 11 years. I raised this case in Parliament just over seven years ago and I had hoped that the matter would have been resolved by now, but it has not.

My purpose in raising this issue is to persuade the Government finally to settle the case of the nuclear test veterans. I want them to show the same compassion, humanity and generosity that has characterised so many of their policies over the past 12 years, and to prove again their commitment to our armed forces. The families of nuclear test veterans are not convinced by that record, however. They believe that their husbands, fathers, brothers and grandfathers were expected to do something that was wrong, and something that we would not ask anyone to do now, which has badly affected their health. They also believe, rightly or wrongly, that the Government are unwilling to say sorry or to act as though they were sorry. For many years, they feel that the Government have had to be dragged kicking and screaming towards giving the veterans the recognition and recompense that they deserve.

I cannot judge whether the families are right or wrong on that. However, since news of this Adjournment debate came out, I have been contacted by lawyers acting for the families of nuclear test veterans, and they have made serious allegations about the Ministry of Defence's approach. If true, something outrageous is taking place. If false, that raises serious questions about the integrity of those lawyers. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure me that the MOD has been doing all that it can.

As I have said, I am raising this issue as a constituency MP, on behalf of a constituent. Shirley Denson is a remarkable woman who has suffered more than her fair share of misfortune. I first met Shirley as long ago as 1998, when she told me about the tragic life of her late husband, Squadron Leader Eric Denson. When he was just 26 years old, Flight Lieutenant Denson captained one of the three Canberra aircraft that were deployed to collect samples while flying through the mushroom cloud created by a 3 megaton nuclear detonation on 28 April 1958. It has been estimated that, while in the cloud, just 49 minutes after detonation, Flight Lieutenant Denson and his crew would each have been exposed to 13,000 rads of radiation.

Flight Lieutenant Denson was ordered to keep the plane there for six minutes. Because of a fault on one of the dosimeters, this was four minutes longer than the aircraft should have been inside the cloud. When the plane landed, the ground crew said that it was the hottest aircraft they had ever handled. Then, back on the ground, the crews would have been exposed to massive radiation fallout from the water that they drank, the fish that they caught and the food that they ate.

I understand the eventual total dosage that Flight Lieutenant Denson received could have been the equivalent of 40,000 X-rays. His vomiting started almost immediately

and became so severe that he was forced to delay his return from the Pacific and to stay on in Fiji for a further three days. He was then told that his dosage had exceeded the legal limit and was sent home. He was not allowed to take part in further tests.

Even though Flight Lieutenant Denson was in obvious ill health, there were no medical checks or a medical follow-up on his return, and nothing was done to alert him of the probable cause of his progressive medical problems. Significantly, no mention was made in his medical records of his activities in the south Pacific in 1958. Given the sensitivity surrounding the tests in a period of global conflict that it is hard for modern Britons to comprehend, there were strict orders of secrecy and he did not discuss these events with anyone. His wife did not know the details of his high dosage of ionising radiation. Even though he suffered for many years with breathing difficulties, acute sinusitis, mood swings, anxieties and depressions, she knew nothing.

In obvious medical difficulties, Squadron Leader Denson ended his own life in 1976 at the age of just 44, after 18 years of pain and upset. He was the father of four children, three of whom were born after 28 April 1958. His health problems live on in these three children, who have all also experienced lasting health problems. Twenty years passed since his death, during which Shirley Denson brought up four daughters on her own. Then, in 1997, she was alerted to the latest scientific evidence about the Christmas Island tests and started her own investigations.

Slowly, Shirley began to learn the true effect of the radiation poisoning on her husband. She has had to fight to find out more. As I have said, she is a remarkable woman. She has faced difficulties at every turn. Officials have insinuated that her late husband was sickly and unbalanced from boyhood. They suggested that his suicide was somehow inevitable and had nothing to do with Christmas Island. But she has pointed out that her husband was pronounced among the fittest of his peers and was an expert pilot. He was a proud Yorkshireman, as proud as any before him, who joined the RAF because he wanted to serve his country, and was a credit to the squadron that he would eventually lead. Mrs. Denson has gathered a great deal of expert support. Most bluntly of all, one medical officer told her, "From the moment he flew into that cloud he was a walking dead man."

Since then, a study of the genetic status of New Zealand veterans, carried out by Dr. Rowland and his team at Massey university, has shown a very high frequency of translocations in the chromosomes of veterans. Dr. Rowland has made a very convincing case that the probable cause is exposure to radiation at nuclear tests. His report was wholeheartedly endorsed by a cross-party parliamentary inquiry two years ago. As a layman, it is hard to see how someone who was at or near the nuclear tests could not have experienced radiation or ingested it through the food they ate, the water they drank or the air they breathed. It is hard to see how this could not have led to health issues later in life, or to genetic changes affecting their descendants.

I am not a scientist; I am a constituency MP. Seven years ago, I spoke in the House to ask for justice for Eric and Shirley Denson. I hoped that progress would have been made. I hoped that there would be an apology for the families of these service men, who unquestioningly and courageously followed orders—perhaps something that said, "We would not do anything like this again, and we are sorry for the suffering it has caused."

I had also hoped that people such as Shirley Denson would have received a modest recompense. Nobody wants to bankrupt the MOD; we just want something to provide some comfort to the families and to allow them to start to draw a line under the whole affair. But here I am again, seven years on, and the opportunity that the Government had to appear magnanimous and generous seems to have passed them by.

Millions of pounds have been spent in the courts and not a penny has reached the families of those who have suffered. Ministers have repeatedly said that they want to offer veterans and their families a settlement, but years and years and years have passed by, and so have many of the veterans themselves. They have not lived to see the apology or recompense they deserve.

Currently, more than 1,000 veterans and their families from all over the Commonwealth are bringing a group action case against the Government. Earlier this week, their legal representative asked to see me to give their side of where we had got to. The lawyer told me that the Ministry of Defence had chosen to defend the claim not on the grounds of whether the detonations had caused suffering, but on the grounds that the veterans had made their claims too late. There is a limit of three years after an injury has been discovered in which a person can make a claim for personal injury, and the MOD's lawyers chose to base its defence on the case being out of time. That is called a limitation defence.

Whether such a defence is correct within the law or not, it appears to a layman to be a very mean defence. Instead of looking at the merits of people's actual claims, the MOD seems to be saying that it would not pay out because people had missed an arbitrary three-year deadline. I still do not know why anyone with an underlying desire to settle would use a defence of limitation. I simply do not get it. In public relations terms, it is a disaster. At best, it looks like a way of delaying pay-outs. At worst, it looks like a way of slithering out of taking responsibility for something for which one really is responsible.

In June this year, Mr. Justice Foskett made a judgment that largely rejected the limitation defence. His ruling is disputed but, as I understand it, he used his discretion and ordered all parties to forget about limitation and just reach a settlement. He said:

"The Government is, of course, pledged to settle legal cases by alternative dispute resolution in all suitable cases whenever the other party agrees to it. In my view this is such a case."

He also ordered the Government to pay millions of pounds in costs to the veterans' lawyers. What has happened since is a matter of disagreement.

My hon. Friend the Minister, in a written answer in *Hansard*, said that

"genuine negotiations have taken place between the parties respective counsels and a settlement proposal was made by the Ministry of Defence, although I cannot disclose the amount. To date, no response has been received from the claimants' counsel or the law firm representing them (Rosenblatts). This is obviously disappointing, but we remain open to meaningful discussions." [*Official Report*, 7 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 98W.]

[Siobhain McDonagh]

However, the public affairs firm working with the lawyers has written to me, stating:

"The MoD say...that they have not received a response from the claimants counsel to the proposed settlement offer, but this is because we have never received such an offer."

I understand that my hon. Friend has said that the contents of any settlement proposal cannot be communicated without breaching a confidentiality agreement. However, the fact is that Shirley Denson does not know the contents. There are more than 1,000 claimants, and they do not know the contents. It seems ridiculous that there can be any negotiations when nobody involved knows what they are. How can my constituent be sure her interests are being taken into account by the Government or by her lawyers when all proceedings are taking place in private? How can anyone know for sure that this Government have as their central aim doing their best for our veterans while everything is clouded in secrecy? Even if there ever were negotiations, they have obviously broken down, and the case will have to go back to the courts. It therefore appears that the next stage will be an appeal by the MOD against the limitation ruling. Even that will not take place until—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I do hope the hon. Lady will not be going into too much detail about a case that is currently before the courts.

Siobhain McDonagh: I certainly will not, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Even that stage will not take place until May, after millions more pounds have been spent by lawyers and after more veterans have passed away, and even then, that will only resolve limitation. Presumably, there will then be a court case about causation, which would involve more money going to lawyers, not to our brave servicemen.

I am just a Back-Bench MP. I want my constituent to have an apology and some recompense for what happened to her poor husband and their children. It seems to me that we are at an impasse. The Government say, "Oh yes, there have been genuine negotiations." The lawyers say, "Oh no there haven't." The Government say, "Oh yes, we have made a settlement proposal." The lawyers say, "Oh no you haven't." It might be pantomime season, but our veterans and their families are looking for a Prince Charming—except that this is not a pantomime, and nobody is laughing. This is really serious. In fact, it is a scandal.

Tens of millions of pounds have already been spent on lawyers alone. That money could, and should, have gone straight to people like Shirley Denson. Over the past few days I have heard about this from all sides, and I still cannot tell who is to blame: it might be the lawyers who are stopping a settlement being made, but the limitation trial and the ongoing secrecy surrounding the settlement proposals have done my hon. Friend no favours. They make it look like the MOD is using "due process" to avoid making a payout. However, I hope that he will be our Prince Charming. I ask him to use this opportunity to prove his commitment to our veterans. Let us agree to settle this now, through an apology to, and recognition of, nuclear test veterans and their families, and a modest recompense as thanks for their courage, commitment and loyalty to their country.

6.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Kevan Jones): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this debate on what is, as she said, a serious subject. The nuclear test veterans issue remains an emotive one more than 50 years since the first nuclear tests were conducted. Some 28,000 British servicemen were involved in the test programmes, the majority in logistic support. I certainly recognise the debt of gratitude we owe to those servicemen who took part in delivering those important nuclear tests.

I understand that last month Members received a letter from Mr. Neil Sampson, a partner in the law firm Rosenblatt, which represents the British atomic veterans' claimants group. I believe that Mr. Sampson's letter made several misleading assertions, and I wrote to Members on 4 December to refute them. I am glad to have the opportunity today to go into more detail and to make the Ministry of Defence's position clear.

For some years, a number of veterans of the test programme have claimed that their health has been directly damaged by deliberate, or accidental, exposure to ionising radiation. The MOD, and successive Governments, have consistently rejected these claims. That is based on three comprehensive and exhaustive studies, none of which found a greater incidence of mortality or cancer in nuclear test veterans than in a matched control group.

Most critically, I want to focus Members' attention on precisely what has happened in the litigation process, so that we are in no doubt about the current situation. Legal proceedings were served on the MOD in April 2005, and since April 2006 the veterans' case has been handled by Rosenblatt Solicitors of London. The particulars of the claim were served in December 2006 and the MOD served its summary defence in January 2008. The MOD disclosed a list of 12,295 documents in June 2008, and the parties identified five lead cases each to be heard in the High Court that were considered to be representative of the entire claimant cohort. A High Court trial was held between 21 January and 6 February 2009 to rule on limitation only. I should explain that the Limitation Act 1980 sets out that personal injury claims should be brought within three years of the date of injury, or within three years of the injured person's date of knowledge that the injury may have been caused by past events.

The Court was asked to rule on whether the MOD was prejudiced by the delay in bringing claims, given that many of its key witnesses are no longer alive or are not able, due to age, infirmity or loss of memory, to give evidence. The Court's judgment on limitation was handed down on 5 June 2009 and ran to more than 200 pages. The main findings were that five lead cases were time-barred and five were not. Importantly, the judge exercised his discretion under section 33 of the Limitation Act to permit the out-of-time cases to proceed to trial. That means that the group action of 1,011 cases may now proceed to a trial on causation and breach of duty. I should like to clarify one point. Contrary to media reports, the veterans have not secured a ruling that compensation should be paid. The ruling was on the limitation point, which is subject to challenge in the Court of Appeal.

The judge expressed concern about the claimants' ability to prove that their condition was caused by exposure to ionising radiation in the tests. He said that he did not want them to be misled by his judgment into thinking that they will be successful at a causation trial. He acknowledged that the case law on causation as it stands, if strictly read, poses a potential problem for the claimants. He said of one case that

"in terms of apparent strength of this claim, on the evidence as it stands, it seems to me to be arguable, but not overwhelmingly so".

He was also of the view that the cases can be tried fairly on the documentary evidence alone, and that the absence of the vast majority of witnesses would not be unfair or prejudice the MOD's case. He acknowledged that it might be an injustice if the MOD had to pay the claimants' lawyers costs. I will cover that issue later.

Following submissions on 19 June 2009, the judge granted the MOD leave to appeal his decision, not only on the limitation issue but regarding legal costs. The judge concluded:

"The Government is, of course, pledged to settle legal cases by Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in all suitable cases whenever the other party agrees to it. In my view this is such a case".

Despite what is claimed by Neil Sampson of Rosenblatt, I have taken great care in my dealings with this case to ensure that the MOD has adhered to the judge's wishes in all aspects of the case. We have attempted to settle the matter through ADR by holding counsel-to-counsel negotiations. My hon. Friend has mentioned confidentiality, and the ADR process is confidential between the parties, so I cannot reveal the details of those negotiations as that would breach the confidentiality agreement between the two parties.

I continue to respect the confidentiality of that process, but I cannot allow Rosenblatt's allegations to stand unchallenged, so I shall address them by setting out exactly what has happened. Between the hearings of 19 June and mid-November, genuine negotiations took place between the two parties' respective counsels—Benjamin Browne QC for the claimants and Charles Gibson QC for the MOD. I understand that Benjamin Browne is no longer the counsel for Rosenblatt. For the avoidance of doubt, let me make it clear that when I describe meetings between the parties, or meetings between the MOD and Rosenblatt Solicitors, I mean that the respective QCs representing the MOD and Rosenblatt have met. That is not unusual when settling a case such as this.

On 29 September I, as the responsible Minister, authorised a settlement proposal, although again I cannot disclose the amount. The proposal was conveyed to Rosenblatt's counsel. Whether or not he passed this proposal on to Rosenblatt is a matter for them, although it would be remarkable if he did not. It certainly appears that the veterans themselves were not told about it, and no response has been received to date.

I therefore gave instructions in early November that the claimants' lawyers be given another chance, and an e-mail was sent by Charles Gibson QC to Benjamin Browne QC. Again, it would be curious if counsel did not pass this on to Rosenblatt but, again, it has been met with silence. Therefore, no settlement has been achieved.

I think this demonstrates that the MOD, and myself as the Minister responsible, have made every effort to engage with the claimants' lawyers, but without success. That left us with no option but to proceed with an appeal, which is listed for a three-week window starting on 4 May 2010.

I should also like to put on the record that Rosenblatt seem to have engaged in a remarkable amount of unusual activity outside the legal process, which I am concerned about. First, I find it quite remarkable that a public relations company was in attendance at the High Court trial, on behalf of the claimants. I understand from my team that that was the first time any of them had experienced that.

The second matter of great concern to me is that the parliamentary lobbyists who claim to represent Rosenblatt met a special adviser to the Secretary of State for Defence in an attempt to persuade him to change the Department's stance. Curiously, the lobbyists appeared to be as much in the dark as the veterans about the fact that a settlement proposal had been made.

Thirdly, I received a letter from Mr. Neil Sampson, who wrote to me in my capacity as a Member of Parliament rather than as Minister for veterans, asking to meet me. Interestingly, he signed the letter as legal counsel for the atomic veterans claimant group, but he did not use paper headed with the Rosenblatt name. When all those factors are taken together, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there has been an attempt to circumvent the legal process.

I turn now to the question of costs. The High Court ordered the MOD to pay the claimants' counsel and Rosenblatt costs of £7.5 million, although the Department argued that costs should properly be reserved, until the outcome of the Court of Appeal hearing. That was based on the fact that permission had been granted for the MOD to take the case to the Court of Appeal, where some or all of the High Court judgment might be overturned. Even on the judge's own analysis, the claimants' causation case was weak, leaving the MOD in fear that some, if not many, of the claimants might discontinue their claims. The judge dismissed that argument, but added that the MOD can seek a refund in the event of any appeal succeeding.

An application will be made to the High Court tomorrow morning by the claimants' counsel—although that will not be Mr. Browne—and Rosenblatt about the litigation, and there will be a request for even more money. The claimants will say that they are substantially out of pocket in this case and will request a court order for a further £2 million on account. That would make an interim total of £9.5 million, which they claim covers about 80 per cent. of their costs, and it implies that the legal costs to date are approaching a staggering £12 million.

Indeed, Mr. Sampson devotes the first half of the witness statement attached to Rosenblatt's application to his costs.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Minister, as I did the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), that too much detail is not acceptable when a case is before the courts.

Mr. Jones: I accept that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Only after making that application for costs does Mr. Sampson turn to his clients' case, and one may wish to draw one's own conclusions from that. By comparison, I confirm to the House that the MOD's legal costs, as invoiced on 27 November, totalled £2,661,225.

[Mr. Kevan Jones]

Finally, I turn to the medical research. Although we have not seen any medical or scientific evidence to substantiate the claims of ill health, we are determined to address the ongoing concerns expressed by nuclear test veterans. That is why I announced to the House on 21 April our intention to work with veterans and experts to investigate the particular health needs of nuclear test veterans and their offspring, with a view to identifying priorities and taking action to improve health.

Over the past few months we have sought to develop proposals for research that would generate practical results, be scientifically credible and be available in a reasonable time scale. We have identified an opportunity to work with academia in this area of health needs analysis, and of course, we will continue to work with the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association on taking this work forward. I have asked officials to draw up costings for the proposals, and I expect this work to be complete early in the new year. We will then put out a tender for the work to start in the first half of 2010. My officials will meet the BNTVA to discuss our proposals early in the new year.

Do I feel for these individuals? Yes, I do. Do I feel for my hon. Friend's constituents? Yes, I do, as she does. This is a legal case, but that case is really about only one thing: hard evidence. The hard evidence simply does not support the veterans' legal case. Grounds do not exist for compensation to be paid. That is why we are proceeding to an appeal. No amount of misleading statements by Rosenblatt, made privately or through the media, can alter the fact that we have made a genuine attempt to put forward a settlement proposal, but we have received no response. Rosenblatt's claimed ignorance of these facts does the veterans a great disservice by raising their hopes and dramatically raising expectations. As I say, I feel for people such as Shirley Denson, and I can only sympathise with the veterans that Rosenblatt claim to represent. Some veterans need to ask some hard questions about the way in which Rosenblatt have conducted themselves in this case.

Question put and agreed to.

6.32 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Monday 14 December 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police Community Support Officers

1. **Hazel Blears** (Salford) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of police community support officers in tackling antisocial behaviour; and if he will make a statement. [306215]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): The White Paper on policing, published on 3 December, places police community support officers at the centre of the Government's efforts to reduce antisocial behaviour, including proposals shortly to give extra powers to PCSOs to tackle firework abuse and graffiti.

Hazel Blears: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. PCSO Ryan Carroll, with whom I was out last Saturday in the Weaste area of Salford, will be absolutely delighted that this Labour Government are committed to funding our police community support officers. This is in marked contrast to the policies of the Opposition, who wish to make deep and savage cuts to our public services. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this Labour Government's support for the fantastic work of our PCSOs remains firm and unwavering?

Mr. Hanson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her support. She will know that it is Labour Government money that has introduced 16,000 PCSOs across the country. Indeed, we have not done just that: for next year, we have committed some £332 million—a 2.7 per cent. increase—to help to support them still further. She will also know, I hope, that in her borough of Salford we have committed a range of support for next year, including part of a £2.5 million package to help to support work against antisocial behaviour. That is all Labour Government money, and it will all be under threat under the Tories.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am not going to try to score political points. I pay tribute to the role of community support officers, but is the Minister aware that quite a lot of their salary is paid by local town councils, parish councils and borough councils? These councils are finding it increasingly difficult to continue to pay this part of the PCSOs' salary. As a result—certainly in Cheshire—a number of community support officers are going to be put out of work. Is that not a shame? What will the Government do about it?

Mr. Hanson: I agree that partnership with local authorities is extremely important. I know that the hon. Gentleman would wish that support to continue, and we have committed a considerable amount of money—£332 million next year. That partnership work is important and some authorities are considering it.

I hasten to say, without being party political, that it is not Labour authorities that are doing that.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that in my part of Sheffield, the incidence of criminal damage has gone down, with 200 fewer victims last year. Police community support officers are playing a key role in that. Is he committed to continuing with the neighbourhood policing model? Police community support officers function really well when they are supported by other agencies and organisations that focus on neighbourhoods.

Mr. Hanson: Indeed, the neighbourhood policing model was reconfirmed in the White Paper only 10 days ago. The funding of £332 million for next year includes PCSOs and neighbourhood support for policing. It works, because antisocial behaviour perceptions and concerns among individuals across the country have fallen from 21 per cent. in 2003 to only 16 per cent. in 2009, largely because of the 16,000 PCSOs on the doorstep.

Detention of Children (UK Border Agency)

2. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the UK Border Agency on its policy on detention of children. [306216]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Meg Hillier): I have recently assumed responsibility for this area of policy and I most recently met officials on 8 December. However, clearly I meet regularly with officials on this issue.

Mr. Carmichael: The report published last week by the coalition of the royal medical colleges made it clear that children who are detained in immigration removal centres suffer from mental health problems and consider self-harm and occasionally even suicide. There can be no other area of law or public policy where the interests of the child lag so far behind considerations of administrative convenience or political expediency. When will the Government act to end this disgraceful practice?

Meg Hillier: Clearly, we do not wish to detain families with children where that is avoidable. However, detention is considered when a family has reached the end of the line—when appeals have been made and refused—and they are only detained for a matter of usually a few days immediately prior to a flight being taken. Let me point out that the report in question considered only 24 cases out of those of the 382 children who were in detention

during the period of the report—fewer than 10 per cent. It did not take into account the views of the clinicians who worked with those children and who know them. There are many pressures on children, and it is not clear that those pressures and problems arise merely from detention.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families recognises that this is a very difficult area, but the whole issue of people in prison and children in prison has not been wonderful under any Government of any party. Could we be more sensitive in the way we treat these children and ensure that they have the full package of support, even for a short time?

Meg Hillier: I can reassure my hon. Friend on two counts. First, children who are detained have a full package of support, including education and access to health care. Crucially, they are with their parents, from whom I would not want to see them separated. Secondly, my hon. Friend raises a wider point about how we deal with such children. We have a pilot running in Glasgow, with Glasgow city council and the Scottish Government, to try to find alternatives. That pilot follows on from one in Kent, and we believe that it is much better and might achieve better results.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): This is not as small a problem as the Minister seems to be suggesting. It was revealed in parliamentary answers in June that 470 children, most of whom were under five, were in such detention. Contrary to the impression that the Minister has given, a third of them had been incarcerated for longer than a month. Does she accept that being locked up is traumatic for many young children and is likely to leave psychological scars? Does she accept that the practice of incarcerating children so young is in contravention of the UN convention on the rights of the child? Will she now agree with me—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Two questions are too many, but asking three really is overdoing it.

Meg Hillier: I am not sure where to begin! Seriously, though, I must first correct the hon. Gentleman's figures. Up to 30 September this year, 25 children were detained for seven days or less—in time for a flight—five were detained for eight to 14 days, and five were detained for 15 to 28 days. A further 10 were detained for 29 days but for less than two months, and none were detained for longer than that. That is an average of just under 16 days. This is always a difficult issue, but we are a Government who are not afraid to duck the tough challenges. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, we are not. It is important that children are not separated from their parents, and I am not sure what the alternative is. If a parent repeatedly refuses to go when their case reaches the end of the line, they have some responsibility. They are offered many packages, but some choose not to take them and are then detained. I would not want to see young children separated from their parents.

Chris Huhne: I am glad that the figures have been updated, but the figures that I quoted were from the Home Office. Why has the Home Office not learned lessons from Canada and Sweden, which have abolished the practice of holding children in custody while their parents await clarification of their status? Surely, any means other than custody of ensuring that those people do not abscond would be preferable—the tagging of adults, for example.

Meg Hillier: We go to great lengths to make sure that we do not detain children. It is only in extreme cases in which parents repeatedly refuse to leave of their own accord that we do so. It is important that the family are a united group at the point at which they are destined for removal. I repeat the simple but important point that I, as the Minister responsible, would not want to see young children separated from their parents.

DNA Database

3. **Mr. Rob Wilson** (Reading, East) (Con): How many records have been removed from the national DNA database in the last 12 months. [306217]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): In the past 12 months, 98 under-10s were removed, and 350 individuals in England and Wales, under the exceptional case procedure.

Mr. Wilson: I thank the Minister for that answer. Across the Thames Valley police area, DNA data for 10,500 under-18s, a good number of whom are children from my constituency, are held. I accept that it is useful to have a DNA database, but we need to be careful that we do not stigmatise children. What steps is he taking to remove the records of innocent children from the DNA database?

Mr. Campbell: We are bringing forward proposals in the Crime and Security Bill to address the concerns of the European Court of Human Rights. We are introducing measures regarding children that we believe are more proportionate and that will meet the Court's requirements, but it is important to recognise that the presence of the DNA of people who have been arrested but not convicted forms an important part of the DNA database, which helps to detect up to 40,000 crimes a year.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Last month, a black rock band from Brixton who were playing at The Oak public house in Burntwood, Staffordshire, were wrongfully arrested after their gig—vehicles, dogs and a helicopter were used—because of a false alarm with good intent. The chief constable of Staffordshire rightly withdrew their DNA samples because no offence had been committed. Is the Minister happy with the Association of Chief Police Officers' guidelines, and is he confident that other police officers in other circumstances would be able to respond as rapidly and rightly as the chief constable did in that case?

Mr. Campbell: We are looking at the guidance that is currently available, but as part of the Crime and Security Bill we are also bringing forward measures to make sure that the deletion of people from the database is put on a statutory footing for the first time, which will be an important step forward.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The proposals the Minister talks about are clearly designed to be the minimum change possible to avoid being declared in

breach of the European Court of Human Rights again. Instead, the Minister could adopt the Scottish system, which allows records for the innocent to be kept normally for only three years. Will he admit not only that his proposals will continue to alienate respectable people from the police, but that crucially the Scottish system has a 16 per cent. higher success rate than his system in matching profiles from crime scenes to names on the database? It is not only fairer, but actually more effective in combating crime.

Mr. Campbell: The Scottish model was not based on any research because none was available at the time. The hon. Gentleman talked about deletion after three years and used the word "normally". In fact, it can be three years plus two years, plus two years ad infinitum. Thus, by comparison, that system could for some people be more draconian than our proposals. It is also based on keeping samples rather than profiles, which is one of the most significant criticisms that the European Court made.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): Although undoubtedly there are arguments for what the Minister says, and the Home Affairs Committee recognises that, people have been arrested when there was no evidence against them and they feel there is a stain on their character. That should very much be borne in mind in this controversy.

Mr. Campbell: That is why we are bringing forward statutory provisions in the Crime and Security Bill to make sure that when deletions are appropriate, they are made easier.

Police Services (Administrative Burden)

4. **Mr. David Gauke** (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the administrative burden on police services. [306218]

9. **Justine Greening** (Putney) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the administrative burden on police services. [306223]

10. **Mr. Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the administrative burden on police services. [306224]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): This issue is frequently discussed in meetings between Ministers and police organisations. It has also been recently addressed in the report by Jan Berry entitled "Reducing Bureaucracy in Policing", published on 2 December 2009.

Mr. Gauke: The Minister mentioned Jan Berry, the Government's adviser on reducing police bureaucracy. She was recently asked whether the police were spending more time away from their desks. Her answer was:

"If you talk to police officers they would say it has remained the same or got slightly worse."

Does the Minister agree?

Mr. Hanson: We are trying to ensure that we reduce the amount of unnecessary paperwork that police officers do, and in fact it has fallen over the past five years. Jan Berry's report, published just over 10 days ago, gave us 43 recommendations. We have accepted 13, we shall be looking at 22 with her over the next year and we are still examining a further eight. There is a lot of work to be done, but we are committed to reducing unnecessary bureaucracy.

Justine Greening: The Minister talks about unnecessary bureaucracy. Surely part of the unnecessary bureaucracy has been processing reoffending criminals let out under the early release scheme. Has the Minister made an assessment of how much that has contributed to police bureaucracy?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Lady will know that there have been and continue to be pressures on the prison system. I was Prisons Minister at the time, and the early release scheme is a temporary measure, which is determined to ensure that we release individuals 18 days early. The reoffending rate on that is extremely low, but it obviously remains a matter of concern and is under review by my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary, and will be ended as soon as practicable.

Mr. Holloway: Jan Berry also said that

"what gets counted gets done",

referring to the Government's fixation on targets. They have been promising to sort these things out since 2001. Why do they think it will be different now?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman should keep up. There is only one target on policing from the Government—the confidence target of 60 per cent. by 2012. We have improved from 45 to 50 per cent. over the past year and we are on target to reach it by 2012. I suggest the hon. Gentleman goes back to his constituency and looks up the facts in future.

Jane Kennedy (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): If it appears that the administrative burdens of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 contributed in any way—however small—to the tragic death of four-year-old John Paul Massey in my constituency last month, will my right hon. Friend agree to review it? Will he also call for a detailed report from Merseyside police and the Independent Police Complaints Commission, who are investigating the matter, so that we can fully understand how complaints made to the police were not followed through and the Government can respond where possible?

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend raises an extremely important issue. That was a tragic death. She will appreciate that there is an ongoing police investigation by Merseyside police. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is in discussions with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about what steps, if any, we need to take to ensure that we prevent such an incident from occurring again. We will certainly look at the lessons and make sure we do all we can to stop the use of dangerous dogs in this way.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds) (Con): Of the 33 recommendations made in the final Flanagan review to cut bureaucracy published in February 2008, only one has been implemented, according to Jan Berry. Can the Minister tell us why?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are working through a range of recommendations. If he looks at the stop and account forms, for example, he will find that we have saved 690,000 hours of police time on such stoppages. We have reduced or removed 27 of the 36 data streams from the Home Office. We are making real efforts to reduce police bureaucracy. Jan Berry accepted that in her recent report, and we will continue to do so. Every step we take reduces police time—for example, there are 6,000 more officers on the front line, whom we have been able to release just by tackling bureaucracy since 2003-04.

Student Visas

Mr. Speaker: I call Miss Kirkbride. The hon. Lady is not here, so I call Mr. Evennett.

6. **Mr. David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the system for processing student visa applications. [306220]

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will take questions 6 and, I believe, 25 together.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It might help if I point out that the grouping was of questions 5 and 6, but as I have just indicated, question 5 no longer applies.

Mr. Woolas: The implementation of tier 4 of the points-based system took place on 31 March 2009, replacing the previous arrangements for overseas students to come to study in the UK. This ensures that only those colleges and schools which provide quality education and take responsibility for their students are licensed to bring in international students. We continuously monitor the systems, and where improvements can be made we will make them. The Prime Minister recently announced a review of certain elements of tier 4.

Mr. Evennett: I thank the Minister for that response. Last month the Prime Minister gave his first speech on immigration for some 18 months. Having ignored the warnings about loopholes in the immigration and the visa systems for so long, why is he now rushing to implement a policy that will hurt legitimate language schools?

Mr. Woolas: That is slightly unfair. The introduction of tier 4 was in part to clamp down on the area about which I know the hon. Gentleman had been concerned—the so-called bogus colleges. We estimate that about 2,000 of those shut down or ceased that part of their operations. In a cat and mouse game, in which we are dealing with attempts at illegal immigration, continuous review is sensible. On the language point, I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider my letter to hon. Members which emphasises that we have issued a consultation to look at what can be done, not a set of definitive proposals, as he seems to fear.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I hope the Minister will not take any lessons from the Opposition, given their general approach to foreigners and immigrants to this country. It must be a good thing if foreigners come to Britain and then speak English with an English accent, not an American accent or some other sub-English accent. Our universities need foreign students, both for economic reasons and for Britain to have a spread in the world as those students go back to their own countries as graduates. I ask my right hon. Friend to err on the side of British universities in this sensitive case, rather than respond to the xenophobic fetishes of the Opposition.

Mr. Woolas: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The value to the United Kingdom of overseas students is very great indeed in cultural and economic terms. It is a question of getting the balance right. We have evidence of abuse under the old system and under the new system, but we are confident because the number of students coming to this country from overseas has increased and we have better controls over those visas.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): The Minister will recall my championing last summer of the cause of two Patagonian women who wanted to come to Wales to brush up on their Welsh language skills. Both were turned down, but one came in on appeal. It emerged that these matters involve a 40-hour round trip from Patagonia to Buenos Aires and five weeks' wait—and the whole thing then being processed from New York. Is it not possible to introduce a simpler and more sensitive means of dealing with such cases?

Mr. Woolas: Only if the hon. Gentleman can guarantee me that in the case of somebody who gets a student visa but turns out not to be a student and abuses the system and overstays, he will not raise complaints. The two cases in question, which I personally looked at, were not compliant with the immigration rules, and no Government can ignore that fact.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): The Minister will have seen the press reports at the weekend indicating that the student suspects in the Manchester terror investigation earlier this year had been cleared to work in the security industry. Does the Security Industry Authority carry out the same detailed background checks on all overseas applicants for work in the security industry as it does on all British applicants?

Mr. Woolas: The hon. Gentleman returns to his theme of the security industry and immigration. I hope he will support the Government in our new procedures both for security industry regulation, which we introduced, and for tougher visa controls. The answer to his question is yes.

Chris Grayling: So the answer is yes. Will the Minister therefore confirm that the application form guidance notes for foreigners expressly state that they do not need to submit an application that has been countersigned by a reputable British referee—in contrast with the requirements for a British applicant?

Mr. Woolas: The hon. Gentleman is trying to present a case that is simply not borne out by the facts. The fact is that there are immigration rules, and I again ask him to support our new border controls, because on that he continues to try to have his cake and eat it. Those are the ways in which we check the validity of people's working rights in this country.

US-UK Extradition Treaty

8. **Danny Alexander** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the operation of the provisions of the US-UK extradition treaty. [306222]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Alan Johnson): The UK keeps all its extradition treaties under scrutiny. The Government's view is that the UK-US treaty is working well.

Danny Alexander: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for that answer, but Gary McKinnon's legal team has been forced to launch a fresh legal challenge in the High Court. The Home Secretary claims that his hands are tied, but many lawyers—including Lord Carlile, the Government's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation—tell him differently. Why is he putting this grossly unbalanced immigration agreement with the US over and above the interests of a very vulnerable British citizen?

Alan Johnson: The hon. Gentleman asked a question about the US-UK treaty. The only argument that I have heard about the treaty being imbalanced is that of probable cause versus reasonable suspicion. I have not heard expressed anywhere another argument about why it may be imbalanced. That was, indeed, the gist of the debate that took place in the House in 2003-04, when the issue was put before Members.

In the case of Gary McKinnon, the issue is completely and absolutely academic. There is no reasonable suspicion involved; there is no probable cause involved; and Gary McKinnon has admitted to many of the offences. The hon. Gentleman may have a question about Gary McKinnon, but it does not relate to the issue in his original question about an imbalance in the UK-US treaty.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): In the latest edition of *Vogue*, Hilary Clinton describes our Foreign Secretary as

"vibrant, vital, attractive and smart."

She has obviously not met the Home Secretary! Given that very close relationship between Britain and the United States, however, and given that the Home Secretary says he has no more legal powers to intervene, surely the best course of action is a diplomatic resolution to the problem. Will he talk to the Foreign Secretary so that he can talk to Hilary Clinton to see whether this matter can be resolved?

Alan Johnson: This matter can be resolved by ensuring that the treaty we have with the US is enforced. This matter can be resolved by upholding the law. The courts have decided and the prosecuting authorities have decided that Gary McKinnon is accused of very serious charges and should answer for them in the US. That is not the role of any politician or any judge; it is the role of the prosecuting authority. On 5 November in a debate in the other place, the ex-Law Lord Lord Justice Lloyd made it plain that that was absolutely right. The US authorities have given us a whole list of assurances that Gary McKinnon will get full treatment for his illness from the American authorities; indeed, a long list of the treatment that will be offered was quoted by Lord Justice Burnton in the High Court as being extremely impressive.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): With the increase in cybercrime and the consequential complexities in international jurisdiction, what consideration has the Home Secretary given to cybercrimes committed and originated in the United Kingdom being appropriate for extradition?

Alan Johnson: I do not believe there is a case for looking at this in the context of a completely separate review of the treaty. We have a situation where a number of crimes are committed in the UK and we have another crime—a terrorist offence—committed against the US by someone in the UK, a British citizen, who did not leave this country at all. It is a question of what the prosecuting authorities decide in this case. Let me quote to the hon. Gentleman, because it is relevant to this issue, what Lord Justice Burnton said in the High Court in July about this particular offence. I think that it would apply to other offences where a crime is committed in another country over the internet. He said of Gary McKinnon:

"It is true that the Claimant's offending conduct took place in this country. However, it was directed at the USA, and at computers in the USA; the information he accessed or could have accessed was US information; its confidentiality and sensitivity were American; and any damage that was inflicted was in the USA. The witnesses who can address the damage done by his offences are in America. Moreover, because the information was sensitive, it would be far more difficult for it to be put before a judge in this country than before a US judge".

I believe that the legal profession is quite capable of deciding—to use the terminology—the forum in which any of these allegations should be prosecuted.

Early Intervention (Nottingham)

11. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): If he will visit Nottingham to discuss the effect on crime statistics of the city's early intervention programme. [306225]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Alan Johnson): The Government recognise the importance of early intervention, and I was therefore interested to hear about the good work being done in Nottingham when the Cabinet met there recently. I would be pleased to make a further visit and have also arranged to meet my hon. Friend on 16 December.

Mr. Allen: Does the Home Secretary agree that we are doing very well—I refer particularly to the crime and drugs partnership in Nottingham—on conventional crime, volume crime, and acquisitive crime which are amenable to better policing, CCTV, better locks and so on, but we still have to work very hard on violent crime, which is often produced by social inadequacy, poor parenting and traumatic experiences in childhood? Does he agree that that is exactly the sort of offending that is amenable to early intervention so that we can grow a generation of young people who are socially and emotionally capable and far less likely to commit violent crime?

Alan Johnson: I do agree with my hon. Friend; indeed, I pay tribute to the work that he has done with Members in all parts of the House on early intervention. In Nottingham, I saw for myself the family intervention programme working extremely well, and doing so because it takes an holistic approach to the underlying problems that are causing offending in the first place. It is not an easy option: there is a non-negotiable element that the parents of the children involved have to undergo. That is a very important element, and I have never seen it operating any better than in my hon. Friend's constituency.

UK Border Agency

13. **Mr. Andrew Pelling** (Croydon, Central) (Ind): What mechanisms are in place at the UK Border Agency to ensure compliance with agreed internal processes and procedures for handling cases and contracts. [306227]

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): Processes for handling commercial contracts are ensured by contract approvals. The mechanisms are: up to £1 million, financial and procurement delegations; £1 million to £40 million, joint approval committee, which is a UKBA internal mechanism; and above £40 million, the group investment board of the Home Office. The level of governance is commensurate with the level of investment required.

Mr. Pelling: I am grateful for the Minister's answer. The reputation of the UKBA is very important to Croydon, where it is a major employer. How well do these procedures also apply to those who will investigate performance, and therefore might abrogate a contract, and to outside consultants who are assisting the UKBA?

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; I recognise the work that he does on behalf of the UKBA, which is an important part of his constituency. Contract compliance is ensured by the monitoring of the contract at a local level by the operational unit and the commercial team within the area, and of course all those contracts are subject to Treasury guidelines. On his point about the awarding of contracts, that is subject to the normal rules, and I am satisfied that we are compliant within the Croydon operation.

Police Counter-Terrorism Units

14. **Patrick Mercer** (Newark) (Con): What assessment he has made of the performance of police regional counter-terrorism units against their objectives. [306228]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): I receive regular assessments from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, which has concluded that the network of regional police counter-terrorism units and counter-terrorism intelligence units means that a well-located, operational platform now exists for targeting the top national priorities in terrorist investigations.

Patrick Mercer: I am most grateful to the Minister, but there are only four counter-terrorism units up and running, and another four counter-terrorism intelligence units, which are minor organisations. What plans do the Government have to expand those minor units into fully fledged ones?

Mr. Hanson: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recognise that we have increased the number of police officers involved in counter-terrorism by 70 per cent. over the past four or five years. Only two weeks ago, I indicated that we would invest about £579 million in 2010-11 in developing the counter-terrorism network still further. We want to do that because of the serious threat, and we are committed to that £579 million for next year but must look beyond that in the comprehensive spending review. The key point is that this is a priority for Government.

North Yorkshire Police

15. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): What plans he has for the future funding of North Yorkshire police; a[illegible]will make a statement. [306229]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): The recent pre-Budget report confirmed that sufficient funding will be available in the years to 2012-13 to enable police authorities to maintain current numbers of warranted police officers and police community support officers.

Miss McIntosh: There has been a general drift towards increasing the number of community support officers as opposed to regular police officers. Although they perform a welcome role, they do not have the same powers as regular police officers, including the power to arrest. In the streets and rural areas of the Vale of York, we have seen an increase in antisocial behaviour. Will the Government now confirm that rather than pump-priming, they will ensure a regular supply of funding for community support and regular police officers in the Vale of York?

Mr. Campbell: The priority, as set out in the pre-Budget report, is to ensure that police authorities have the resources for front-line officers, whether they are warranted officers or PCSOs. It is up to chief constables and police authorities to make best use of that funding, because they decide on operational matters.

Domestic Violence Advisers

16. **Andrew Stunell** (Hazel Grove) (LD): How much funding his Department has allocated for independent domestic violence advisers in the next 12 months. [306230]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): This year's funding has already been allocated, and a further £4 million will be available in 2010-11 for IDVAs and multi-agency risk assessment conferences.

Andrew Stunell: I thank the Minister for that rather woolly reply. May I draw his attention to the fact that in Greater Manchester, the number of recorded incidents of domestic violence has risen from 56,000 to 64,000 in three years, but only one in eight results in an arrest? Bearing in mind that the perpetrators are always known,

does he believe that that record is satisfactory? Will he now give more support to the vulnerable victims of domestic violence in Greater Manchester and elsewhere?

Mr. Campbell: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the recently announced strategy for ending violence against women and girls is anything but woolly. So is the £13 million that will support services. At a time of financial constraint, it indicates the Government's priority on these matters. He will know that local agencies also need to address the matter as their priority, because it is they that bring the most resources to the table.

Police Numbers

18. **Bob Spink** (Castle Point) (Ind): How many front-line police officers there were in England (a) in 1997 and (b) at the latest date for which figures are available. [306232]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): In March 2009, 125,891 police officers, 87 per cent. of total strength, were deployed to operational roles in England and Wales. Improvements in how forces match work force resources to demand from the public across the range of force functions will further improve responsiveness, public confidence and value for money.

Bob Spink: I thank the Minister for that reply, and credit where credit is due, the Government have kept their promise and put more police on the streets, which was very necessary. Will they consider special constables specifically? They do a wonderful job in Essex, as I am sure they do in other constabularies. Will the Government have a drive to get more special constables?

Mr. Hanson: Indeed, the hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point. We will have a special constables promotion weekend to celebrate that very shortly, and one thing I have done is write to all hon. Members to ask them to participate. I am also—this comes from the White Paper—looking at how we can deploy special constables to help with deployment issues, so that we get full-time officers working on other areas, where their skills are more needed. The hon. Gentleman's point is very important and one that I support.

Policing and Crime Act (Section 14)

20. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): What plans he has to publicise the change in the law contained in section 14 of the Policing and Crime Act 2009. [306234]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): The Home Office's "Tackling the Demand for Prostitution: A Review" document recommends a campaign aimed specifically at sex buyers to raise awareness about trafficking for sexual exploitation. We are currently considering how a campaign can be used to highlight the change in the law and its effects.

We are also updating the Home Office circular on policing prostitution and work with other criminal justice agencies. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell), who has responsibility for crime reduction, wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on 11 December to outline this matter in detail.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank the Department for that letter, but one thing that shocked me when I launched some research was how few men had ever been arrested for soliciting. One hundred and three men who had paid for sex were interviewed, but only 5 per cent. had been arrested, meaning only five or six men. The risk with the new offence is that men do not think they are going to be successfully prosecuted. Can the Minister promise me that the prosecution and publicity strategies will go hand in hand, so that men who pay for sex from exploited women know that they risk getting a criminal record?

Mr. Hanson: Absolutely—my hon. Friend makes an extremely valid point and was instrumental in bringing that legislation forward. It is absolutely vital that we ensure both that prosecutions take place and that the legislation has a deterrent effect. We are now looking, with colleagues such as those in the POPPY project, representatives of which met my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, to look at how we can promote the issue early in the new year, to ensure that we do what we are trying to do, which is reduce prostitution and soliciting on the streets of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on her relentless campaign to ensure that section 14 got on to the statute book. May I make a suggestion to the Home Secretary? One of the best ways of discovering trafficked women would be to have another Pentameter operation. Pentameter 1 and 2 were very successful—the latter involved 830 actual arrests. Is he considering a Pentameter 3, which would involve all police forces in a campaign to outlaw the trafficking of women?

Mr. Hanson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his recognition of the participation of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough in bringing that law to fruition and the importance that we give to how it is implemented and examined. We are certainly considering the hon. Gentleman's suggestions, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State is looking into these matters.

Police Numbers (Northamptonshire)

21. **Mr. Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): How many police officers there are per 100,000 population in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [306235]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): Northamptonshire had 196 police officers to 100,000 of the population as of 31 March 2009, compared with 266 for England and Wales.

Mr. Bone: The Minister has already made it clear that Northamptonshire is under-served by police officers compared with the national average. What makes that worse is that only 10 per cent. of police officers' time in Northamptonshire is served on the beat. Have not this Government completely failed in getting police officers on the beat in Northamptonshire?

Mr. Hanson: Those officers who are on the beat seem to have reduced overall crime by 19 per cent. over the past five years, so whatever they are doing, they are doing something right. I do not recognise the figures the hon. Gentleman used. On the earlier bureaucracy question, we said that only 20 per cent. of time is spent on paperwork. Sometimes paperwork is important, because it leads to convictions and reduces crime still further.

Police Services (Administrative Burden)

24. **Mr. Shailesh Vara** (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the administrative burden on police services. [306238]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism (Mr. David Hanson): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given some time ago.

Mr. Vara: I am grateful to the Minister for referring to his earlier answer. He will recall—after he has checked his notes—that in his earlier reply, he referred to a report published by the Home Office on 2 December. That report mentions that the 27,000 portable hand-held computers given to officers are ineffective because they lack the proper programs. Does he agree that it is bad enough that officers have excessive bureaucracy, but worse still that the equipment they have to deal with it does not work?

Mr. Hanson: As I said, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier. We are very concerned about bureaucracy, and he will know that £80 million of taxpayers' money has been invested in hand-held devices, reducing bureaucracy by some 30 minutes per officer per shift, by taking them away from paperwork and putting them back on the front line. That is an investment to which this Government have been committed, and—if I can be political—it is one of those investments that the Opposition may find it necessary to cut.

Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Given that complaints against the police often lead to a considerable amount of administration and given that what complainants often want is simply a better service from their local police, will my right hon. Friend consider giving the Independent Police Complaints Commission a remit to improve services in addition to its current responsibilities for complaints?

Mr. Hanson: In the White Paper published two weeks ago, we proposed additional responsibilities for the IPCC. We have also ensured that we strengthen the role of police authorities. One of the key issues is to remove direct elections, which the Opposition favour, and strengthen local democracy through police authorities, which the Government favour. Those are key issues in improving the redress that citizens have when police systems, sadly and occasionally, fail.

Student Visas

25. **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the system for processing student visa applications. [306239]

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer that I gave several moments ago.

Mr. Mackay: I am not sure that the Minister fully answered the earlier question, watching as I was on the screen in my office, about referees being confirmed as British and suitable for purpose. Will he now answer that question?

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for asking the same question as the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Evennett). When the right hon. Gentleman gets to his office tomorrow, he can read the reply in *Hansard*. The serious point, of course, is that there are different strategies for checking on the eligibility and suitability of those people. This question has been raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and that is why we have re-examined the system to ensure that it is robust.

Topical Questions

T1. [306240] **Jessica Morden** (Newport, East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Alan Johnson): The Home Office puts public protection at the heart of its work. The pre-Budget report provided good news for the police, recognising their importance to the public and to the Government in delivering safe and secure communities.

Jessica Morden: Two new groups of street pastors have recently started operating in Caldicot near Newport in my constituency. They are doing a fantastic job helping young people who get into difficulties on nights out, especially in the run-up to Christmas. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is an excellent volunteering initiative and that street pastors offer reassurance and help the police to tackle antisocial behaviour in the night-time economy?

Alan Johnson: I do agree: street pastors are a crucial part of the community effort in many parts of the country, including Newport, to make our streets safer, especially on busy evenings such as Friday and Saturday. I have met street pastors myself in various locations and my hon. Friend does a service to her area by raising their profile and raising this issue in Parliament. They deserve widespread praise.

T3. [306242] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Home Affairs Committee was told that there were no plain-clothes officers deployed at the G20 protests, but we now know that there were at least 25. Does the Home Secretary agree that we need guidelines setting out the roles and responsibilities of plain-clothes officers when they are policing public protests?

Alan Johnson: The House will be aware that Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary did a very important report on this issue, which was widely welcomed. In fact, I cannot think of a single area in which it was not given a warm welcome. We have carried over those recommendations quickly into the White Paper, and we will implement that in relation to how we police protests, including how plain-clothes police officers react.

Jacqui Smith (Redditch) (Lab): I recently wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) about the case of one of my constituents who was unfortunately burgled and was surprised that the burglars focused almost completely on taking jewellery and other gold. He believes, as do I, that this may have been prompted by the burgeoning of cash-for-gold adverts on our television screens and in our newspapers, often with no identification required to obtain money in exchange for gold. My hon. Friend helpfully replied that he was carrying out a review in this area. May I encourage him to involve trading standards officers in that work and to consider legislation as quickly as possible, perhaps even in the Crime and Security Bill?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this important matter. We are concerned about burglary, particularly in these difficult economic times. We are considering the issue and we would envisage involving trading standards, even though staff are already working hard. If legislation is necessary, we will legislate.

T4. [306243] **David T.C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): A recent audit report on the UK Border Agency refers to £9.6 million that was incorrectly paid out for asylum applicants following a data management failure, and £1.4 million paid to landlords for properties that subsequently turned out to be empty. Will one of the Ministers tell us whether anyone was prosecuted for that, and may we have a fuller explanation than the two sentences in the report?

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): I am of course familiar with the report to which the hon. Gentleman refers. The asylum support system involves more than £100 million of public expenditure—a figure drastically reduced from previous years, as we get in control of the system. The housing element of that is subject to the difficulties, which he will recognise as a constituency Member of Parliament, in the private housing market. That is why we have taken the report so seriously and made improvements.

T2. [306241] **Alun Michael** (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the lessons of the Cardiff violence reduction project, led by Professor Jonathan Shepherd, were rolled out across the country, that would not only help the police and reduce the number of victims, but make a considerable financial contribution to the national health service? Does my right hon. Friend also agree that the key lesson is not only that of partnership, but that of taking a clinical and scientific approach to understanding why bad things happen?

Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend has made a huge contribution to tackling crime in this country, both in opposition and in his early days as a Home Office Minister of State. He could make no bigger contribution than through the work he has done with Professor Jonathan Shepherd in Cardiff—the results are truly remarkable, and it is now in the operating framework of the NHS to comply with this. I see no argument for a local hospital not submitting data to the police service, given that this is not only important in tackling crime, but crucial, as my right hon. Friend says, in reducing costs to the NHS. This is a win-win situation, which is why the Cardiff model, including the use of polycarbonate glasses, is now being used right around the country.

T6. [306245] **Mr. Andrew Pelling** (Croydon, Central) (Ind): Estimates are that we have 2,000 irregular migrants in Croydon—a number that might increase as a result of the closure of the Liverpool walk-in asylum centre, given that Croydon is now the only inland asylum centre. How many more irregular migrants will there be in Croydon as a result of that change, and specifically, how many unaccompanied asylum seeker minors? That will lead to extra pressures on public finances.

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the continuing dialogue we are having on that important issue, which comes about, as he knows, as a result of the improvements and changes we made in Liverpool to ensure that further representations need a face-to-face interview. The overall picture is good, because the numbers are coming down. I cannot answer him specifically—of course, time will tell—but we have been in constant contact with his local authority since the announcement was made.

T5. [306244] **Mr. Neil Gerrard** (Walthamstow) (Lab): Following on from the strategy that was recently announced to tackle violence against women and girls, which will include some reforms to the criminal justice system, what plans does the Secretary of State have to make comparable reforms to the asylum system in relation to women and girls who have suffered similar forms of violence in their countries of origin?

Alan Johnson: That issue was raised during our very wide consultation on violence against women and girls. The publication of our strategy is not the end of the issue; in fact, it is the beginning. We have looked at taking out certain strands, including the issue my hon. Friend mentions, getting much more information on it and tackling it as part of the ongoing strategy.

T7. [306246] **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): Following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's helpful interview recently, will the Home Secretary confirm that the identity card scheme is going to be scrapped?

Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was making it absolutely clear that the ID card will be voluntary. The ID card will be of benefit to people in Manchester and the north-west, and more and more people are seeking to have one. I have one myself—in case nobody in here knows who I am—which I can show the right hon. Gentleman afterwards. Tomorrow we will be making a further launch in Blackburn, to great public enthusiasm.

T10. [306249] **Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock) (Lab): What is the problem with extraditing to the United States Nosratollah Tajik, the Iranian whom the Americans want under our wonderful extradition treaty? Is it not a fact that there are many people in London, including those in our security and intelligence services, and the banking and financial sector, who do not want him to go to the United States? How is it right to extradite Gary McKinnon and not this fella?

Alan Johnson: The issue regarding extradition begins with the courts. It is the courts that decide: the district court, the High Court, the House of Lords and the European Court of Human Rights, all of which have been open—and are still open—to Gary McKinnon. When the courts make a decision on the forum—the place in which that gentleman should be tried—the process kicks into action.

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): Will the Home Secretary look at the number and depth of inspections of county constabularies, not least because they impose a huge burden on resources and manpower, and divert time, energy and police officers away from front-line policing?

Alan Johnson: I will consider what the hon. Lady has said, but the role that Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary plays in inspecting police forces around the country is important, as we found out recently with one particular police force where the public had huge concerns. HMIC's role is to ensure that it can assist police forces in reaching the level of the best. There is always a case for keeping such burdens to an absolute minimum and ensuring the right balance, which we will look at as part of our constant war against bureaucracy in the police force.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary guarantee that the new chairperson of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs will be someone of genuine scientific independence who will challenge the evidence-free policies pursued by all Governments since 1971, which have resulted in Britain having the worst drug problems in Europe?

Alan Johnson: I will of course ensure that the chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has those attributes. Indeed, we have agreed to a member of the advisory council being part of the interviewing panel for the new chairman.

T8. [306247] **Chloe Smith** (Norwich, North) (Con): Does the Minister not agree that the number of speed cameras in Norfolk should be increased to a level that would allow more of my constituents to benefit from the Norfolk safety camera partnership?

Alan Johnson: It is good to hear someone speaking up for speed cameras; indeed, I am delighted. The issue is of course an operational matter for Norfolk police, which I am absolutely sure will be aware of the hon. Lady's intervention. I, for one, am a big fan of speed cameras.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The number of procedures under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 continues to rise, with 4 million sentient beings the target that we see each year. Is the Home Secretary happy with the effectiveness of the legislation? The policy of reduction, refinement and replacement is clearly not working. What alternatives might there be?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Meg Hillier): We have a policy of reduction and ensuring that we do not license unnecessary animal procedures. We do not have an upper cap on such procedures, however, and it is important that each application is considered in the proper way on the science available.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): When the Home Secretary dismissed David Nutt, the chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, two other independent scientific advisers resigned. When the Home Secretary said that he had no regrets, three others resigned. Is he still of the view that he would do the same thing now, given the outcry from independent scientists, if the circumstances were the same?

Alan Johnson: I would absolutely do the same thing. The Select Committee on Science and Technology, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), who is the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friend, has done us all a service by not concentrating on the past, as he continually does, but by looking to the future, particularly in relation to the contribution made by Lord Rees from the other place.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I had a very useful meeting with the Immigration Minister earlier this summer to discuss my concerns about the administration of the visa system in Pakistan. I wonder whether he can now reassure the House that the administration of visas in that post is up to speed, satisfactory and being carried out with integrity.

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those issues as she did; they were important to the process. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary visited Islamabad and gave assurances, which we have now met. There is some work remaining to be done on appeals, where the appeals have been won and the visas have to be issued and we have to contact the individuals concerned, but we are now on top of that situation.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): The Home Secretary referred earlier to the HMIC report "Adapting to Protest", and its relationship to the White Paper. What are the Government intending to do about an HMIC recommendation that has not been carried forward into the White Paper—namely, that the position and status of

"the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) must have transparent governance and accountability structures, particularly when it is engaged in quasi-operational roles, such as the collation and retention of personal data"?

Alan Johnson: Of course, that is a matter not just for us but for ACPO itself. The new chairman of ACPO is keen to look at how the association can be changed. He has a number of ideas, and it is right that we take that recommendation from HMIC forward in discussions with ACPO. That it not to say that it has been shelved; it is being progressed, but in a different way from the other recommendations that were placed in the White Paper.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Office for National Statistics projects that, unless immigration is brought into balance with emigration, it will be impossible to keep the UK's population below 70 million. Is the Home Secretary concerned about that? If so, what is he going to do about it?

Alan Johnson: I have made it absolutely plain that I do not believe that we will get to 70 million. The projections from the ONS do not take into account the changes over the past few years, and it would be a big mistake to think that the next 10 years are going to be like the previous 10 years in relation to movements around the world, in relation to the conflicts in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Indeed, I think that those projections will change over time, as previous projections have done.

Afghanistan and the EU Council

3.32pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on my visit to Afghanistan and to report on the conclusions of the European Council and our role in the global talks on climate change. First, Afghanistan. On Saturday and Sunday this weekend, I visited our troops in Helmand and Kandahar, and met President Karzai and his Defence, Foreign Affairs, Interior and Security Ministers. I also met our commanders on the ground, and Afghan army leaders. Today, I have had a meeting of our National Security Committee, with the Chief of Defence and the chief of our security services, and talked to NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen.

The first purpose of my visit to Afghanistan was to thank our brave armed forces in a year in which 100 of their colleagues have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. I wanted to acknowledge and congratulate them on the dedicated work that they continue to do, day after day, and, as Christmas draws near, to wish them and their families well. I think that I speak for everyone when I say that the thoughts and prayers of the House and the whole country are with them. British people are safer at home because our troops are fighting for our safety this Christmas in Afghanistan.

I wanted also to assess progress to reinforce our campaign in Afghanistan, and, in my meetings with President Karzai and his team of Ministers, to begin preparations for the conference on the future of Afghanistan that will be held in London on 28 January—an event which I believe will galvanise the international effort on political and economic progress, as well as on security, and to which President Karzai has agreed to present his plans for the country's future.

Our strategy is to ensure that al-Qaeda can never regain free rein in Afghanistan. To achieve that, we must weaken the Taliban and strengthen Afghanistan, stage by stage, district by district and province by province, putting the Afghans in control of their own security. But we must first address the Taliban insurgency with all the resources and power that we have at our disposal. Yesterday, I flew on one of the newly deployed Merlin helicopters. Over the past three years, we have doubled helicopter numbers, and more than doubled helicopter flying hours. There will be further increases in both over the coming months.

I also saw the mine-resistant Mastiff patrol vehicles and the smaller but equally well-protected Ridgback vehicles, and heard how since the summer we have increased the number of Mastiff by more than 80 per cent. and almost doubled the number of Ridgback—hundreds of new vehicles funded from the Treasury reserve, which are now every month saving lives in Afghanistan.

Aerial surveillance helps us track and target Taliban improvised explosive devices, and that surveillance has now been increased by over 20 per cent. Yesterday I asked for and received an assurance from President Karzai of the new assistance the Afghan people will give us in detecting and dismantling these improvised explosive devices. Afghan forces will now be trained, as I saw yesterday, to detect and disable IEDs. There will be more local police on the ground and we will be training 10,000 police recruits. There will be better intelligence from the Afghan people about the source of planned IED attacks and encouragement not to harbour those planning explosive attacks on British soldiers.

I can say now that we will go further in providing more equipment and support to our armed forces. Tomorrow, the Defence Secretary will announce plans for more equipment for the Afghan campaign, including more specialist counter-IED support. The latest tranche of urgent operational funding from the Treasury will include an extra £10 million for hand-held mine detectors to follow the £12 million set aside earlier for new explosive disposal robots, over 30 of which are now in operation tracking IEDs. I can also announce a package of longer-term investment in our counter-IED capability, including new and enhanced facilities for training and for intelligence. This will amount to an extra £50 million a year—£150 million in total this year and over the next two years.

Our strategy involves working with the Afghan army and police so that over time they can take security control. President Karzai confirmed to me that he is increasing the number of Afghan troops in Helmand to 10,000. Already in the last few days, 500 new troops have arrived. Once the police training college we are running in Helmand is at full strength from the spring, there alone we will be able to train 2,000 police officers every year.

Yesterday I saw for myself the reality of British forces mentoring and partnering Afghan troops and the new momentum that is resulting from that. The Taliban are a determined adversary; they will not give up easily. I am under no illusion—there will be hard fighting ahead—but I draw great confidence from the immense professionalism of our servicemen and women and from the telling effect they are already having on the enemy and the galvanising impact they are having on the Afghan forces they are partnering.

I can report that 36 countries have now offered additional manpower to the Afghan campaign. We know that the planned increase in American, British and Afghan forces over the coming weeks and months will allow us to review force ratios and develop a new balance in Helmand. As I have said to the House, the priority for the additional British forces is to thicken in central Helmand and to shift the emphasis towards partnering Afghan forces. I can report to the House that commanders on the ground told me yesterday that already in two thirds of British bases, our forces patrol jointly with their Afghan counterparts. It is by partnering in this way—first in the army and then with the police—that we will enable the Afghans to step up to the challenge of dealing with the Taliban and with extremism, and, ultimately, when the conditions are right, that we will allow our troops to return home.

I also saw from my visit and from my discussions with our commanders and civilian leaders that we are seeing the beginnings of the political process, which must complement our military strategy. Tribal and town elders already provide the kind of effective, accountable grass-roots government that will be the foundation for any successful political strategy.

So the decisions we have made in 2009 set a new framework for action in 2010. Partnership with Afghan forces will turn Afghanisation from an aspiration into a real force for progress in every district. Even closer

working between our military and civilian missions will allow military action to provide the space for Afghan institutions owned by the Afghan people to develop at a faster pace.

Mr. Speaker, 68 international delegations will come to London for the 28 January conference on Afghanistan. All 43 powers engaged in the international coalition will attend, together with other regional and Muslim partners and international organisations, and they will be led by the Secretaries-General of the United Nations and NATO. I agreed with President Karzai that this conference will deliver a new compact between Afghanistan and the international community based on priorities that he has outlined.

The first of those priorities is security. We expect nations to announce troop deployments building on the total of 140,000 troops promised for 2010. I hope that the London conference will also be able to set out the next stage in a longer-term plan: the changing balance between alliance forces and Afghan army and defence forces as the number of Afghan forces increases from 90,000 to 135,000 next year and possibly to 175,000 later, as well as, of course, the future numbers, roles and tasks of the police, intelligence services and local security initiatives in Afghanistan.

Secondly, in London, NATO and international security assistance force partners must set out an outline programme for the transfer of lead responsibility from coalition to Afghan forces, along with an agreed set of conditions and criteria to establish the eligibility of provinces and districts for transfer. I hope we can agree in London that that process can begin during 2010, subject to conditions on the ground.

The third priority relates to reintegration. London must secure international support and financial backing for Afghan-led resettlement and reintegration programmes. Fourthly, there is the issue of economic development. As President Karzai proceeds with an anti-corruption programme, London must provide comprehensive long-term support for the Afghan economy, including support for farmers and working people in the towns and villages, in order to offer them a greater stake in the future of their country. That will include providing Afghans with credible alternatives to the poppy and the insurgency.

Finally, London must address the issue of co-ordinating international efforts on Afghanistan. That means reaffirming the role of the United Nations, announcing the new special representative of the Secretary-General, and announcing stronger civilian co-ordination in ISAF. London must also encourage a new set of relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbours, and, in particular, better joint working with Pakistan.

Although Afghanistan and Pakistan are different countries with their own cultural traditions and histories, they are both at the epicentre of global terrorism. Our national security interests require us to deny al-Qaeda space in which to operate across Pakistan, and also to deny it the option of returning to operate in Afghanistan. One of the biggest advances of the last year is increased co-operation with the Pakistan authorities in support of the efforts involved in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and we want to build on that in the coming months.

As part of our partnership with the Pakistani armed forces, construction is now under way of the new UK-funded Baluchistan training facility, in which British mentors will be working with Pakistani training staff to build counter-insurgency capability for the 30,000-strong Baluchistan frontier corps. As part of our partnership with the civilian Government of Pakistan, the new education taskforce, which is focused on implementing education reforms, is meeting for the first time today in Islamabad. Moreover, £250 million of Britain's development assistance to Pakistan is directed towards education, as I agreed with President Zardari earlier this month, because nothing is more important to addressing the root causes of so many of Pakistan's problems than the building of a strong universal state education system, free from extremist influence and offering a viable alternative to low-quality schools, which include the poorly regulated and extremist madrassahs.

One of the first decisions of the European Council was to reiterate its strong commitments to promoting stability and development in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A second decision was to express the united view of Europe that there was "grave concern" about Iran's nuclear weapons intentions. We recognised—here I quote from the communiqué—that Iran has

"so far done nothing to rebuild confidence of the international community in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme."

While we agreed that our offer of renegotiation and negotiation remains on the table, because of our continuing concerns about Iran's nuclear programme we agreed to begin working on options for sanctions in the new year.

The Council also discussed the economic recovery, jobs and sustainable growth, and how Europe could move forward a climate change deal at Copenhagen. We reiterated unanimously that policies in support of the economy should

"remain in place and only be withdrawn when recovery is fully secured."

The Council

"welcomed the rapid and determined action"

taken across Europe to strengthen financial regulation and supervision. It also agreed that

"Remuneration policies within the financial sector must promote sound and effective risk management".

Following the introduction in the UK of an additional bank payroll tax when bank and building society employees' discretionary bonuses are above £25,000, the Council encouraged

"Member States to promptly consider available short-term options"

to implement "sound compensation practices".

Fourthly, in response to a British initiative, the Council emphasised

"the importance of renewing the economic and social contract between financial institutions and the society they serve and of ensuring that the public benefits in good times and is protected from risk."

The Council encouraged the International Monetary Fund in its review to

"consider the full range of options including insurance fees, resolution funds, contingent capital arrangements and a global financial transaction levy."

There are very few moments in history when nations are together summoned to make common decisions that will reshape the lives of every family, potentially for generations to come. Our aim must be an ambitious climate change deal in Copenhagen that will enable the European Union to make good its commitment that we

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"move to a 30 per cent. reduction"

in carbon emission levels

"by 2020 compared to 1990".

The agreement in Copenhagen must also include a clear financial framework for the short, medium and longer terms. This financial agreement must address the great injustice that is climate change: that those hit first and hardest by climate change are those who have done least harm; and that, in fact, 98 per cent. of those most severely affected and dying live in the poorest countries, which account for only 8 per cent. of global emissions. So it is essential that we honour our responsibility for helping meet the costs they face in adapting to, and mitigating the consequences of, climate change.

I can report to the House that, to assist in adaptation and mitigation, the European Union has pledged €7.2 billion—or £6.6 billion—over three years; that is €2.4 billion for each of the years 2010, 2011 and 2012. This should enable the world to reach its aim of $10 billion in climate change help for each year until 2012. Let me say that this financial agreement could not have got off the ground without the strongest European co-operation.

Britain will contribute £1.5 billion, but there must also be additional and predictable finance in the medium term to 2020 and beyond. The figure of €100 billion has been set for the long-term climate change needs of developing countries by 2020, and the European Council reconfirmed its commitment to "provide its fair share" of this international public support. I can say to the House that from 2013 the UK will provide additional climate finance over and above our 0.7 per cent. overseas development commitment, and that the European Council reaffirmed its "official development assistance commitments" in view of the

"impact of the economic crisis on the poorest."

There is an urgent need to support rainforest countries. Twenty per cent. of early finance should be allocated to forest protection. To achieve a reduction in deforestation of 25 per cent. by 2015, leading to a 50 per cent. reduction in 2020 and a complete halt in 2030, will require global financing of about $25 billion over the period 2010-15. A majority of that should come from developed countries, to support the rainforest countries' own efforts.

Today, we send a message to all of Europe and to the world: there is work to do. We are only halfway to an agreement. Now is the time for developed and developing countries not to divide among each other, but to do what no conference of 192 countries has ever achieved before: to come together with a forward-looking programme to advance our shared goals.

This week, world leaders are gathering in Copenhagen and, as I have indicated to the House authorities and Opposition leaders, I will join global leaders in Copenhagen, starting from Tuesday with meetings with leaders from the African Union and the European Union, and the UN Secretary-General and the Danish presidency, as well as representatives from the hard-hit small island states.

The agreement at Copenhagen must be ambitious, global, legally binding within months, consistent with a maximum global warming of 2° C and ensure the fairest financial settlement for the poorest countries. Britain, our European partners and the Commonwealth will continue to work tirelessly for the best result at Copenhagen, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): The European Council covered three main areas: foreign affairs, the environment and economic issues. I want to ask about all three, as well as the vital issue of Afghanistan.

On Afghanistan, as the Prime Minister knows, we have supported the increase in US and UK troop numbers, and, as the Prime Minister has said, at Christmas time we should all be thinking of our forces and their families. I would like to pay tribute to all those charities and organisations sending gifts, cards and presents to our forces in Afghanistan. Our forces should be on our minds for all that they are doing.

On strategy, we believe that this is the last best opportunity to get this right. Does the Prime Minister not agree that everything now needs to be brought together, including having the right concentration of troops in every part of southern Afghanistan? He talked about thickening the troop presence in central Helmand, and we look forward to hearing more about that. Perhaps he can tell us when he will be able to update the House on what is being done specifically to make sure that British troops cover fewer areas, in greater density—we believe that that is vital.

On the issue of the Afghan national army—the Prime Minister, like me, saw it being trained at first hand, and it is incredibly impressive—does he agree that we are now probably going as fast as we can and that to go any faster would involve a danger that the quality of recruits would suffer? Can he tell the House a little about what is being done to make sure that those Afghan national army recruits who are trained and then sent to the south of Afghanistan actually go to the south of Afghanistan, and that the units function properly?

On the London conference, about which the Prime Minister said quite a lot, could he give clarification about the new individual working on behalf of the UN Secretary-General? Does he still agree with us that it would be good to have someone over and above that to co-ordinate all the civilian side, rather in the same way that Stanley McChrystal is co-ordinating all the military side? That is what we have been pushing for, and perhaps the Prime Minister could clarify whether that is still the Government's position.

On Iran, does the Prime Minister agree that the time has come for the EU to take a much stronger line? It is clear that talks with Iran are not moving, but the summit just referred to "considering", as the Prime Minister said, options for next steps. Should not those specifically include three things at the very least: a tough new inspections regime on Iranian cargo; a ban on any new European investment in Iranian oil and gas; and serious financial sanctions like those that exist in the United States? We have been here before. The Prime Minister said in June 2008 that

"action will start today for a new phase of sanctions on oil and gas."

Can he assure the House that this time the essential measures will be finally agreed and put into place?

On Copenhagen, can the Prime Minister be clear about what he thinks can now be achieved? Does he agree with Yvo de Boer, the UN's chief climate negotiator,

that achieving a full legally binding agreement is no longer possible at Copenhagen itself? If he is right about that, is it not essential that we see a full political declaration agreed this week? Is that not the minimum that the world has a right to expect? Does the Prime Minister agree with us that it is vital that any agreement is consistent with keeping global warming below the 2° C threshold?

On the issue of funding, the Prime Minister gave us the figures, but could he tell us a bit more about where the money is coming from? The UK's contribution was originally £800 million, then it was £1.2 billion and then it was £1.5 billion. Can he tell us where this is coming from? If, as the Prime Minister's spokesman said on Friday, it is coming from the aid budget, can the Prime Minister tell us whether this will have any impact on other aid programmes?

Turning to economic issues, this Prime Minister once described the UK budget rebate as "non-negotiable"—that was before he gave £7 billion of that rebate away. When he did so—this is the reason for asking the question today—Tony Blair said that the Government had obtained in return a review of the EU budget. That was meant to start in 2008 and to finish by the end of 2009, but it is absolutely nowhere near finishing. Indeed, in the draft summit conclusions the deadline slipped to next July, and in the final conclusions it slipped another six months, to the end of 2010. At a time when budgets are being cut in the UK, does the Prime Minister agree that in reviewing the EU budget, the main purpose should be to push for a real-terms cut in that budget? Does he also think that while public servants in this country are getting low pay increases or even, in some cases, pay freezes, it is completely wrong for EU civil servants to receive a 3.7 per cent. pay rise?

Turning to the new Commission, is it not the case that the Prime Minister's whole approach to this has been wrong from start to finish? He started by spending valuable political capital on a completely misconceived plan to make Tony Blair President of Europe and ended with Britain having none of the key economic portfolios. Indeed, the Government became so dysfunctional that at one stage Peter Mandelson tried to land himself the job of High Representative. The Prime Minister shakes his head, but perhaps he should just nod. Did Lord Mandelson try to get the job? Is there anybody in there? He was frantically hitting the phones, apparently—the rat was trying to leave the sinking ship, but he is still on board.

Friends of Lord Mandelson, which always used to mean Peter Mandelson himself, said that he thought the whole thing not pathetic, but "botched". That was his word. Is that not the right description for the Prime Minister's handling of this affair?

On financial services, cross-border co-operation is clearly vital. However, will the Prime Minister confirm that Britain has effectively given up its veto on blocking regulatory decisions in times of crisis when there is a disagreement over whether there are financial consequences for the taxpayer? He did not mention that in his statement—perhaps he can answer it when he has finished chuntering from a sedentary position.

The summit conclusions also called for the restoration of sound public finances. May I ask the Prime Minister whether he ever expected to come back from a European summit as Prime Minister after 12 years' stewardship of Britain's finances with the biggest deficit of any major economy, with Britain the only G20 country still mired in recession and with the worst outlook for public finances in a generation? Is that what he meant by leading the way in Europe?

The Prime Minister: I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman spent most of his time raising issues that were not even discussed at the European Council. It would have been better if he had addressed in a bit more detail all the issues that I put to the House this afternoon.

The first issue was those matters that relate to Afghanistan. It is very important to recognise that there is all-party agreement on these matters and not to exaggerate any differences between us at this particularly sensitive time, when more troops are going into Afghanistan, when we are persuading the Afghan forces to increase their numbers in Helmand province, and when we are trying to extend civilian and military co-operation so that we can tackle the Taliban insurgency effectively by weakening them and strengthening the Afghan state.

I said to the right hon. Gentleman that we were increasing our presence in Helmand, but so, too, is the American presence in Helmand increasing. The number of troops in Helmand will go up from something in the order of 20,000 to 30,000 over the next few months. That will include, of course, the Afghan army's making a bigger contribution in Helmand. Over time, the balance will change between the alliance forces—if I can put it that way—and the Afghan forces. By 2011, across the whole of Afghanistan, the Afghan forces will exceed the alliance forces. On top of that, we have the Afghan police numbers, too. That is our policy for the gradual Afghanisation of security control. In that way, district by district and province by province, we can transfer to Afghan control. I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that when I met the Afghan forces in Helmand yesterday, who were training on anti-explosive devices, those whom I talked to came from all different parts of the country to Helmand, both to be trained and to form part of a more effective army for the whole of Afghanistan in the long run.

I said that we were proposing that humanitarian and civilian issues related to the co-ordination of the effort of Afghanistan were to be a main feature of the London conference. Now that Mr. Kai Eide has resigned as the UN representative—I believe that he will stay on until March, but he is retiring after that—we will, in my view, have to appoint both a representative from ISAF and one from NATO. I talked about this to the Secretary-General of NATO this afternoon. There will be a UN appointment and there will also be a NATO appointment. It is important to recognise that all these interests must be represented, but there must be greater co-ordination at the centre.

As far as Afghanistan in general is concerned, I hope that Members of the House will feel that the measures that we are taking to deal with IEDs are important in protecting our troops and in destroying the morale of the Taliban. I have to say that when I was in Afghanistan yesterday, it was reported to me that 1,500 IEDs had been detected and dismantled through the expertise of our forces and, in particular, that of the engineers, who do such important work. If we can continue to defuse and dismantle, and therefore disable, these IEDs, we

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can reduce the rate of casualties that we have suffered over the past year—80 per cent. of casualties throughout Afghanistan and among British forces are due to IEDs. It is therefore absolutely essential that we take all the measures that I announced today to increase our effort to deal with them.

I turn now to Iran. It is true that we have been at the forefront of proposing sanctions on Iran, but it is also true that taking unilateral action without getting European support and the support of the rest of the world would not yield the impact that we want. We are working with our European partners and with the rest of the international community so that the agreed and unanimous approach to what Iran has done can yield practical results in sanctions that actually work.

The right hon. Gentleman also raised issues regarding the European Council. At the Council, we discussed a timetable for resolving budget issues, we discussed economic co-operation across Europe and we discussed the fiscal stimulus that has been necessary to bring the economy forward and to move economies out of recession. I have to tell him that there are 12 European economies still in recession and that a number of economies, including Germany, have suffered a far worse recession than we have. We have the highest employment rate in the G7, and unemployment here is lower than in most other countries that are comparable to us, as a result of the action that we have taken. I have to say to the Conservatives that there is agreement at the European Council that we needed fiscal stimulus so that the economy could move forward, agreement that we should have taken action to restructure the banks, agreement that the fiscal stimulus should continue, and agreement that we must all take action against unemployment and to help small businesses in these difficulties by providing Government funds. The only group that seems to stand outside that agreement within Europe and the rest of the world is the Conservative party that is represented on the Opposition Benches.

On climate change, it is incredibly important that the voice of this House, from all parties in the House, says that we want developing and developed countries to work together to secure an agreement. That is why our offer of support is right if we are to get an agreement that shows developing countries that we mean business in tackling the issues that they face most of all as a result of climate change. That is why we were the leaders in a European agreement that has ensured that very substantial funds—about $3.5 billion a year—will go to helping developing countries adapt to and mitigate climate change, including through action on forestry. But we have a great deal of work still to do, because we have to get an agreement about the longer term as well as the short term. We have to get an agreement about intermediate targets and about transparency in all the issues that we undertake. I think that we in Britain have led the way with a climate change Act, and we have led the way with an announcement that we will be active in providing long-term finance to help developing countries. We have suggested a figure of $10 billion as a fast-track initiative for both the European Union and the rest of the world to follow, and there is now virtual agreement on that.

We will continue to press for a just and fair settlement at Copenhagen. The reason why I want to go there tomorrow is to talk to all the parties about what we can do together. The reason why I think the Opposition should support Britain's being present is that we have led the way on the millennium development goals, we have led the way on debt relief, we have led the way on international economic co-operation, we have led the way on the restructuring of the banks and we are leading the way on climate change—something the Opposition could never do.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I would like to thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and of course to add my expressions of gratitude to our armed forces who are serving so bravely and selflessly in Afghanistan. With families across the country preparing to come together for the Christmas holidays, may I also pay tribute to the families and friends of our servicemen and women? The enormous sacrifices they are also making for this war are uppermost in all our minds at this time of year.

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for his detailed statement on Afghanistan, but I should like to seek clarity on two points. First, will he clarify what he believes to be the role of China, Russia and Iran? Whether we like it or not, those nations are absolutely crucial in securing long-term stability in Afghanistan. I was not quite sure, from what he said, whether any or all three of those nations will be represented at the London conference. If they will not, will he provide us with some detail about how we might engage with all three of them to help to stabilise Afghanistan, notwithstanding the other major differences that we have, particularly with Iran at this particular time?

The second point is this. We all know that the war in Afghanistan will be won only if we win the battle for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. In turn, that is heavily dependent on the legitimacy of President Karzai and his Government in Kabul. The Prime Minister referred to President Karzai's efforts against corruption, but could he tell me how exactly he will judge progress on good governance and against corruption in Afghanistan by the time President Karzai comes to the London conference in January?

Given that the resources allocated and the strategy we have been pursuing in Afghanistan during the past eight years were so heavily influenced by the war in Iraq, I should like to know what the Prime Minister thought of his predecessor's admission this weekend that he would have invaded Iraq whether there were weapons of mass destruction or not. The Prime Minister not only supported his then boss in taking us to war, but he also signed all the cheques, so people have a right to know: does the Prime Minister agree with Tony Blair that the invasion would have been justified even without the paper-thin excuse of weapons of mass destruction?

Finally, on climate change, a few hours ago we heard that the talks in Copenhagen were suspended—although I am told that they restarted a few minutes ago—because of differences in the international community between the developing and developed world. I am sure the Prime Minister agrees that the "I will if you will" brinkmanship needs to come to an end. Too many players are making their commitments conditional on the commitments of others, so will the Prime Minister make a unilateral commitment to help break that deadlock? The Committee on Climate Change said that to meet the European Union target of 30 per cent. cuts on 1990

levels by 2020, the UK would need to cut its emissions by 42 per cent. by 2020. The Prime Minister does not need to wait for anyone else to make that commitment. Will he make it today?

The Prime Minister: First, let me deal with Afghanistan. It is right that at a conference discussing Afghanistan, not only the coalition partners should be present but so too should regional neighbours, and that is our intention. It is very important to recognise that in the longer term Afghanistan's future is dependent on both non-interference by its immediate neighbours and economic and cultural co-operation between Afghanistan and its neighbours. We will do what we can to advance that process—difficult though it has been to get some of the neighbours even to talk to each other. That is part of the discussion that will take place at the conference. There will be discussion too of the role of Pakistan, because if action can be taken on both sides of the border against al-Qaeda and against the Taliban, we have a better chance of succeeding in our objectives in Afghanistan.

When President Karzai comes to London, we will expect him to be able to show progress on the anti-corruption laws he is proposing and the anti-corruption taskforce he has set up. Last week, there were 12 arrests for corruption. Obviously, people will look at the appointment of his Cabinet and the appointment of district and provincial governors, and at what they say. He is holding a conference on those very issues in Kabul tomorrow, and I hope that will show the determination to make progress. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that President Karzai is determined to come to London with a plan to deal with some of the problems in Afghanistan that have been intractable over many years.

As for Iraq, there is an inquiry sitting. The inquiry will hear evidence and then make its report.

As far as climate change is concerned, there is a European offer of 20 per cent., to go to 30 per cent. if we can get an ambitious settlement—where other countries join in going to the ambitious ranges they have set. If Japan, Australia and Brazil, with their very ambitious ranges, and South Korea can go further, and if we can see the movement we want from other partners in the negotiation, our wish is to go 30 per cent. But we will have to get not only intermediate targets agreed with other countries and statements about national emission plans from the developing countries, but also, as I have said before, financial agreement and technology exchange agreements. Verification issues will be raised as well, so there is a lot of work still to be done at Copenhagen. I know that the right hon. Gentleman wants the most ambitious agreement possible and I am grateful for the support he will give us in these efforts.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister referred to Pakistan. He knows of the great sacrifices being made by the civilian population and the military in Pakistan in fighting extremism. Did he discuss with President Karzai the importance of effective co-operation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly in combating extremism in the Pashtun areas on both sides of the Durand line?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend, who is an expert on these affairs, will know, we wish to work with the Pakistan Government, not simply for them to deal with the problem of the Pakistan Taliban, as they have done in the Swat territory and equally in Waziristan. We want to work with them to deal with those areas where there were problems also with the Afghan Taliban based in Pakistan, so we want to see the maximum co-operation between President Karzai and the Pakistani authorities, including President Zardari and Prime Minister Gilani, and we want to see more effective co-operation between the armed forces of both countries so that in the end we can have joint measures that will protect the border areas. Co-operation between Afghanistan and Pakistan will be very much more important in future years. I am grateful that we have the present level of co-operation with Pakistan on the issues that I raised in my statement, but we want to see further co-operation on security issues strengthened in the months to come.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): It is good to hear that our troops in Afghanistan are getting more mine-clearing equipment, but at the expense of what? A recent review set up by the former Secretary of State for Defence says that the defence equipment programme is unaffordable. Is that right?

The Prime Minister: We have increased defence spending every year. There is £1 billion more being spent on defence this year, and we have given real-terms rises to defence of nearly 10 per cent. over the past 10 years. In addition to that, we have provided for the equipment needs and the other additional needs associated with the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is because we announced additional money from the Treasury reserve to pay for new equipment that the Mastiffs and the Ridgbacks are going into Afghanistan as vehicles, additional helicopters were able to go to Afghanistan, and the anti-IED commitment is being provided. We have met all the requirements of our military forces on the ground to enable them to mount their campaigns in Afghanistan. I am sorry that Conservative Members are trying to dispute that, when the fact of the matter is that all urgent operational requirements of the Ministry of Defence have been met and will continue to be met.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. A further 26 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. As usual, I should like to be able to accommodate everybody, but in order for me to do so, short questions and short answers will be required.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I met a delegation of Afghan MPs in Geneva a few weeks ago. They are extremely grateful for the efforts being made by this country on their behalf. However, one woman in the delegation—I cannot say publicly what she told me in private—said that women are still extremely vulnerable in that country. I have raised the matter in the Chamber several times in the past. The UN has criticised the Afghan Government for not doing enough to protect women. This woman is in danger. Will the Prime Minister raise the matter—the situation of women—during the Afghan conference in London in January? That was one of the reasons why we went in to help Afghanistan.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right. We made representations about the Shi'a family law that was discussed in the summer. The President ensured

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that some of the discriminatory parts of that were removed as a result of international pressure, as well as that of people in his own country, including women, urging that he change the position. I realise that the rights of women in Afghanistan are an issue that we must promote at all times when we are discussing the future of Afghanistan.

It is true that as a result of what has happened over the past few years, whereas no girls went to school, there are now 2.5 million girls at school. For the future of Afghanistan, that is a vital change that is happening. Increasing the numbers of children at school, including girls, is a vital part of the programme. At the same time, maternal mortality was among the worst in the world. I understand that one in eight births ended in the death of the mother as a result of the inadequate facilities. I am told that recent research suggests that 100,000 children are now surviving to the age of five who would otherwise not have done so, as a result of the improvements in tackling infant mortality and child health. These achievements are a result of bringing health and education to the people of Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend is right: we must never forget the importance of these issues – the social and economic improvement of the condition of the population – when we are talking about the future of Afghanistan.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): The Prime Minister's announcement of an additional £50 million for three years on counter-IED and intelligence work is very welcome. Will that money come as an urgent operational requirement from the Treasury, or will it come from within the existing defence budget?

The Prime Minister: The Chancellor reported in the pre-Budget report that expenditure on Afghanistan from the reserve was something in the order of £600 million three years ago. It will be almost £4.5 billion in the next two years. That is as a result of additional money made available by the Treasury.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): Very recently, seven Taliban attacked a convoy that was being protected by 300 members of the Afghan army. Almost all those 300 fled the scene immediately, and one of their generals said that they have no motivation to risk their lives for an election-rigging President, for their own country or for the international community. The Afghan police are a lawless bunch of depraved thieves. Does the Prime Minister really believe that we can build a solid security service on those collapsing foundations?

The Prime Minister: There are two views we can take about Afghanistan, and my hon. Friend takes a different one from mine. The first view is that the Taliban have a huge amount of support in Afghanistan and the Afghan people will not resist them. The second view, however, is the one I take – that the Taliban have very limited public support from the people of Afghanistan. All opinion polls show, and all the evidence that we have is, that the public do not want the Taliban to return in Afghanistan. The public know the damage that the Taliban did in the past: they know the threat to women's rights; they know the damage that was done to children's education; and they know the justice that the Taliban meted out unfairly, particularly against women. Our best estimate is that the people of Afghanistan, by a very substantial majority, do not want the Taliban to return to government. The people want to be assured that there is security, guaranteed by Afghan forces and by the alliance forces working together. Over time, they will want to see security kept by the Afghan army, Afghan police and Afghan security services, and that is what our strategy, which we have proposed for some time, is working towards. I do not accept my hon. Friend's initial premise that the Taliban have anything like the support that he suggests.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): May I ask the Prime Minister, is it a responsible policy to fund at least part of the cost of current operations by raiding future defence capability?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman has got to understand that the total amount of additional public expenditure—on top of the defence budget—in Iraq and Afghanistan is £14 billion. That is on top of the defence budget; that is additional to a rising defence budget. I think he has got to understand also the scale of the investment that we have made in equipment, which is in the order of £5 billion. He should look at the overall amount of money that has been invested in Afghanistan, including £1 billion alone in new equipment for vehicles, as well as the extra investment in helicopters and IED equipment. The total sum for equipment is £5 billion, much of it spent in the past two years to make for better vehicles. In the Chancellor's pre-Budget report we have allocated, as the hon. Gentleman knows, in the reserve sufficient funds for Afghanistan in the coming year. I do not think his criticism of us should be that we have spent too little on or invested too little in the safety of our forces. We have done whatever is necessary.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry, North-West) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister aware that the whole House will be much encouraged by his trip to Afghanistan, in particular his direct conversations with President Karzai? The number of troops being committed is very encouraging, but the quality, as my right hon. Friend knows, will be very important too. That will depend on provincial governments, so could we see a start by President Karzai on some reorganisation of the Kandahar provincial government, which is so central to the problem associated with corruption?

The Prime Minister: I talked to President Karzai about the governorships of Kandahar and Helmand, and about the appointments that he will make to his Cabinet in the next few days. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is the quality of local government on the ground, the quality of the Afghan army and, particularly over time, the quality of the police in Afghanistan that will be so vital to success in the future. But what I saw yesterday was Afghan recruits training, at a high level of demand from the British trainers, and acquitting themselves well. What I have also seen in Governor Mangal in Helmand is a governor who can show that you can get resources directly to the people and build up a system of law. Wherever that is not happening, action should be taken, and we will give our views directly to President Karzai.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): The Prime Minister did not answer the leader of the Liberal Democrats on the case for going to war in Iraq on the grounds that it

would be inappropriate because an inquiry on that is being held at the moment. Does he believe, then, that his Defence Secretary's remarks on condemning going to war without giving correct proof were inappropriate?

The Prime Minister: I did not answer the question because this is a statement on the European Council and on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and an inquiry has been set up to look at all the issues affecting Iraq.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): The Prime Minister is well aware that all wars have to end with some kind of political settlement or negotiation. We are now in our ninth year of this war in Afghanistan; billions have been spent and thousands of lives have been lost. At what point does he envisage some kind of political engagement with those people in Afghanistan who are not supporters of Karzai and his corrupt Government, but who want some other solution?

The Prime Minister: I think my hon. Friend draws the wrong conclusions in his remarks. Britain cannot be safe from terrorism unless we deal with problems that exist not just in Britain but on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. If we do not take on al-Qaeda and prevent it from having space in Afghanistan, with the freedom of movement to plan operations in Britain, then we will be failing in our duty to the security of the people he represents in London and people in the rest of the country, who have had to suffer from terrorist plots that have been organised from the Afghan-Pakistan border. Yes, it is right that Afghanistan is an infant democracy where problems existed in a very big way during the election campaign, but it is better for us to build Afghan forces that are under an Afghan democracy, to build up security services that are under an Afghan President who is elected by the people, and to build up local government in Afghanistan than to give up and allow the people who never wanted us to take the action that was necessary to win this argument. This is about the security of the people of Britain.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): The Prime Minister has rightly praised our brave troops in Afghanistan, who include my former regiment, the Coldstream Guards. He said that he would provide more equipment and support for the armed forces. The armed forces do not operate only in Afghanistan, so can he reassure the House that the future defence budget will be fully funded and explain who was responsible for the chronic deficit and underfunding in defence that has occurred over a number of years and is highlighted in a devastating report by the National Audit Office? Sadly, it is embargoed until midnight tonight; otherwise, I would quote from it.

The Prime Minister: The time when the defence budget was cut massively was under the Conservative Government between 1992 and 1997. Defence expenditure has risen in real terms by 10 per cent. since 1997. I keep repeating to the hon. Gentleman that the urgent operational requirements of our defence forces when they are in action abroad, as they have been in Iraq and Afghanistan, are met by separate claims from the reserves. I think he should look at the arithmetic of what has actually happened, and he will see that extra urgent operational requirements have always been met by the Treasury. I really do think it is unfortunate, when he can see the additional resources that have been made available, the reserve claims that have been paid and the urgent operational requirements that have been met, for him to try to tell the British people that our armed forces have not got the equipment they need. They have the equipment for the job they are doing.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): Pacific island states are already suffering significant effects from global warming. They have produced national adaptation plans, but do not have the money to implement them. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that money is available from the EU funds for this adaptation now, as without it the implications of global warming will only continue to get worse for those islands?

The Prime Minister: I know from my hon. Friend's work that she knows very well the challenges that are faced by the island states. She also knows some of the countries that were present at the Commonwealth conference because she has very strong links with them. I know perfectly well that countries from the Maldives to Bangladesh look to the climate change conference in Copenhagen to give answers to the problems they face as a result of immediate and urgent requirements owing to climate change. The purpose of the European contribution—$3.5 billion a year in 2010, 2011 and 2012—is to contribute to a worldwide fund of something in the order of $10 billion a year, principally for the expenditure on adaptation that she wishes to see. There is a proposal that the island states that have suffered most of all will get a proportion of that fund to enable them to take action immediately. We know very well that some of the problems they face are urgent and have to be addressed not just in the next few years but in the next few months.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Does the Prime Minister recognise that he does not need an inquiry to know that his "thank you" to the British troops would be all the stronger if it contained an apology, to them and to the people of Afghanistan, for the failure to resource the war there properly in the early years because of the folly of going to war in Iraq on a false prospectus?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry that the Liberal party is trying to follow the Conservative party in subscribing to a myth that the Afghan campaign has been underfunded. That is totally wrong, and I hope that in the interests of the unity of our country in facing the terrorist threat, the Conservative party and the Liberal party will recognise that we are spending more on our armed forces and on meeting urgent operational requirements than we ever did.

We have taken the view, which I believe is held by the vast majority of the British people, that we cannot defend Britain against terrorism simply through the extra money that we are spending on security and police forces within our borders. We cannot operate a "fortress Britain" strategy when we have problems arising in Pakistan and Afghanistan that bring terrorist plots to London and our country from their bases there. It was right to take the action that we did, which has been and will continue to be properly funded. If the Opposition continue to perpetuate the myth that inadequate funding

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is being provided for our armed forces, the public will lose support for the effort that we are making, which would be a very unfortunate outcome.

Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister accept the wide welcome for the additional money going to climate change measures in developing countries, on top of the 0.7 per cent. commitment? Does he also accept that anyone who believed that there would be a full, legally binding agreement on climate change this week clearly comes very late to the subject and would be better off persuading his sister parties on the fringe in Europe to stop opposing climate change legislation?

The Prime Minister: I tend to think that the Conservatives are better at the photo opportunities than at policy on these issues. They have made no commitment at all to additionality when it comes to climate change, and they seem to treat the climate change debate as a joke. It is a serious matter, and we are going to bring it to a conclusion.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Will the Prime Minister accept that the Afghan police have not made the same progress as the Afghan army? Given that five members of our Army have just paid with their lives because of a police incident, does he accept that it would be irresponsible to accelerate their recruiting, vetting and training?

The Prime Minister: The tragic incident in which five of our soldiers lost their lives must be properly investigated, and we must get all the answers. That is right for the families, but it is also right for the future of co-operation between the Afghan police and military and the British police and military. On the ground in Afghanistan, our troops are working day by day with Afghan forces. They are working in joint exercises with the Afghan police and military, and we would be making a grave mistake if we simply stayed with the status quo and did not move forward the partnering with them. The scaling up of that partnering, which has been agreed as a result of the recommendations of General McChrystal—we advocated it months before that, and President Obama is now putting resources into it—is the right way forward for Afghanistan. The other strategies, including the one that the hon. Gentleman proposes, would leave us at a standstill and not getting the progress that we need so that Afghan forces can take direct control of their own security over time.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): The European Council discussed economic co-operation. Were there any specific discussions about what to do if the economies of Greece in particular, but also Ireland, Spain and Portugal, continue to deteriorate?

The Prime Minister: It is the intention of the European Union to maintain the fiscal stimulus and show that we have deficit reduction plans for the future, and it is the intention of each of the countries of the EU to show that they have deficit reduction plans as well as a commitment to protect themselves against the recession. That was the basis of discussion at the European Union.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): My nephew has just returned from a six-month tour in Helmand with the Royal Engineers. He tells me that it was particularly frustrating that they would spend all day detecting and disarming improvised explosive devices and return to base at night, only for the Taliban to come out during the hours of darkness to re-seed the fields with such devices. If there is not going to be a curfew at night, the Afghan army or police or someone has to secure the ground, because all that is happening at night is that the Taliban are taking back the ground that engineers and others have spent all day retaking, at risk to their own lives.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that difficulty. If the hon. Gentleman has specific information that he wants people to look at, I will be happy to look at it myself and pass it on. However, the truth of the matter is that there is enhanced surveillance of what is happening on the ground. Where there is change in the land during the course of a week or a day, we are in many cases able to detect it. Important security work is therefore being done to make sure that where IEDs are planted, we have more information about them and the people planting them. I agree that that has been a problem, but I think that we have better security measures than we had before.

David Cairns (Inverclyde) (Lab): Did my right hon. Friend get the opportunity to witness first hand the tremendous contribution to the mission in Afghanistan being made by the Royal Navy, in what is often seen as an Army campaign? Does he agree that any suggestion that the budget of the Royal Navy could be cut without hindering either the mission in Afghanistan or our other vital global interests is just plain wrong?

The Prime Minister: I met members of the Royal Navy in Helmand and Afghanistan yesterday. Their work with Sea King helicopters is of course incredibly important in Afghanistan, but many people from the Royal Navy are working with our troops in Afghanistan and doing an incredible job. Our commitment to the Navy is shown by our decision on the aircraft carrier.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I was in Camp Bastion in September last year, just after 2,000 British troops, including many from 16 Air Assault Brigade, delivered a turbine to the Kajaki dam, which was a daring and dangerous mission. Fifteen months later, that turbine has yet to be installed, because the other equipment needed cannot be taken there because of the dangers. Bearing in mind the Prime Minister's promise that he was going to get more European nations involved, and with the additional aerial surveillance, will he get them to secure that road so that the battle of hearts and minds can be won?

The Prime Minister: I would not like the hon. Gentleman to give the wrong impression. Two generators are there, but the third has not been brought into use. The decision has been made that diesel-powered, local generation is a better way forward to meet the gap in electricity power that exists in that area. As far as my meetings yesterday with people in Afghanistan are concerned, the extra work that we will do on economic development, which is giving people a stake in the future, will include not

only building roads, as we have done, but giving farmers the opportunity to benefit from the wheat harvest and to grow wheat. I think that that will help around 40,000 farmers in the Helmand area over the next year.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): At the European Union Council meeting, did the Prime Minister meet many Heads of Government who thought that the recovery was now so secure that it was the right time to bring in swingeing and savage cuts?

The Prime Minister: Every member of the European Union present wanted to maintain the fiscal stimulus and said that it should be maintained until the recovery was assured. Only the Conservative party is so arrogant to believe that it knows better than almost every country in the world and every political leadership, whether of the right or left, around the world. The answer, of course, is that if they had the Conservative policy, there would be more unemployment, more small businesses going to the wall, more people losing their homes, and a higher deficit and higher debt.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): While we should salute the work being done by the Pakistani army, not least its special forces, it remains the case that a large proportion of it is deployed along Pakistan's border with India. Those troops would be better employed going after the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan. What discussions has the Prime Minister had with either the Government of Pakistan or the Pakistani military to encourage them to redeploy more of their forces?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that a very substantial number of the Pakistani armed forces have been operating in the Swat valley and that about 30,000 of the Pakistani forces have been, and are, in Waziristan, taking on the Pakistan Taliban there. There has therefore been a considerable change in the amount of effort that the Pakistan authorities are making in tackling the terrorist threat within their own country. However, I agree with him that, if the relationship between Pakistan and India were less tense, with less need for troops on both sides of the border, Pakistan could do more to tackle the terrorist threat within its own borders. That requires India and Pakistan to work more closely together. We are determined to see what we can do to make that possible. I have talked to both Prime Minister Singh and President Zardari about that. If we can get a closer working relationship between India and Pakistan, even after the horror of the Mumbai bombings, it would greatly help the campaign against the Taliban and against al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer earlier about the plight of the south Pacific islands. We visited five of those islands—Fiji, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Tonga and Kiribati—during the summer recess as part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The Speaker of Tuvalu said to me, as I left for the plane, "Thank you so much for coming and for thinking about us. Please do not forget us." That is the message that I would like to give to my right hon. Friend as he goes to Copenhagen.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has taken a long-term interest in the problems faced by those island states, where we could be dealing with climate change refugees and evacuees in the not too distant future. Copenhagen is important, because it can allow us to make a commitment to help immediately those island states that are facing these immense difficulties, and help them to obtain support to deal with the adaptation necessary. We will not forget the challenges faced by these islands. Many of them are part of the Commonwealth and it is important that we come to their aid when they are in need.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): Why was the Prime Minister's statement completely silent on the Council agreements on a tangible EU citizenship, a single EU judicial space, an internal security system and what it calls a common asylum system by 2012? As Labour Ministers argued against all those policies during the negotiations on the Lisbon treaty, as I saw for myself on the European Convention, does the Prime Minister regret having to support them now and pretend that he was always in favour of them?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman has moved on since he was at the European Convention. He does not realise that we secured all our red lines on these issues when we negotiated the treaty. He has forgotten that the constitutional concept—the original plan for the Convention—was abandoned and we have a treaty that now meets the interests of the British people, so much so that the Conservative party has abandoned its long-held policy and has decided that it does not want a referendum on the treaty any more. No doubt the right hon. Gentleman supports his party.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) (Lab): In relation to Copenhagen and climatic change, can the Prime Minister say whether China and India will play a major part in any negotiations or agreement reached in Copenhagen? There seem to be some doubts about China's position.

The Prime Minister: China and India must be central to an agreement in Copenhagen. As we know, one of the great problems of the previous Kyoto agreement was the number of countries not involved in it. It is crucial that China plays its part in the negotiations. It is one of the biggest emitters, if not now the biggest. It is also crucial that India, which is also growing fast, plays its part in the negotiations. I will meet Premier Wen and, I hope, talk to Prime Minister Singh in the next few days. We will try to work together to secure the necessary agreement.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The Prime Minister has explained that there will shortly be 30,000 allied troops in Helmand province. When the Helmand operation began, there were 3,000 British troops funded to 60 per cent. per head, compared to 10,000 British troops there today. Who was Chancellor of the Exchequer in 2006 and what lessons have been learnt?

The Prime Minister: The number of troops in Afghanistan has risen substantially, but the equipment available to those troops has also risen substantially as the needs of fighting a guerrilla war against the Taliban have had to be met. I say to the Conservative party that it is making a huge mistake if it believes that it can

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persuade the British people, and that it is in the interests of the British people that they be persuaded, that our troops are underfunded and not properly equipped. That campaign was run by certain Conservatives over the summer. It does huge damage to public support for the operation.

Everybody here knows that our troops have had substantial additional funding from the Treasury, that the vehicles available to them are far more sophisticated than before, that the helicopter support is available and that we are bringing in the best counter-IED support to deal with a new threat that has been posed by the Taliban. I hope that the Conservative party will rethink that position, which I believe will damage public support for this exercise.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's visit, and indeed that made last week by the Leader of the Opposition. I am sure that those visits gave a lot of comfort and support to our troops. May we also show some comfort and support for the Afghanis who seek to claim asylum in this country? Is it really right that we should remove people to a country that is so patently unsafe?

The Prime Minister: Every application for asylum is looked at on its merits and dealt with on its merits. My right hon. Friend knows that as Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. That is the position of the Government and it will continue to be our position.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Thousands of service families, including those at RAF Lossiemouth and RAF Kinloss, are reading reports of planned base closures and defence cuts. Why is the Prime Minister not being up front about his preference for conventional defence cuts, rather than scrapping the Trident nuclear programme, which would save £100 billion?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows that scrapping the Trident programme would lose hundreds—indeed, a great many—of jobs in Scotland as well. If his issue is jobs he should know that we have funded the aircraft carriers, which are being built partly in Scotland. We have increased the defence budget every year. We have also, of course, increased the urgent operational requirements for our Air Force, as well as our Navy and Army. When he looks at the record of enhanced expenditure and investment in our armed forces, both in Scotland and in the rest of the UK, he will know that the Government are doing their job.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the tremendous support he has given to my early-day motion 1396, from last year, on the so-called Tobin tax—an example of how the few can be made to help the many. Will he also support a new early-day motion on the same lines, about an Ashcroft tax?

The Prime Minister: It is very strange that the Conservative party automatically—almost without thinking about it—came out against a global financial transaction tax. Such a tax is now being discussed in all countries in Europe and investigated by the International Monetary Fund, and the EU is to produce a report on it. Certain people around the world who are esteemed in the academic profession as economists are supporting this, but, as a reflex action, the Conservative party is against it. The Conservatives are interested in one form of tax—that is, tax avoidance. It is about time we heard whether the deputy chairman of the Conservative party, after 10 years, has honoured his promise to pay tax in the UK.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to our armed forces, not just those in combat roles, but those doing humanitarian work in areas where the international development agencies cannot operate—building bridges, building schools and so forth? Does that good work count towards the UN target of 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product?

The Prime Minister: If it is international aid that is helping underdeveloped and low-income countries, it is possible that it will count. That is the right thing to happen. The purpose of overseas development aid is to help the poorest of the world and allow them—through better provision for health and education, and through economic development—to raise their living standards and to take themselves out of poverty. The achievement of international development aid and all work done with developing countries will be that many millions more people are taken out of poverty.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Next year, the UK will pay £4 billion more to the EU than it did last year. In the pre-Budget report, the Chancellor announced a tax on jobs. That will raise £3.1 billion. Is it surprising that people in this country are fed up with giving money to the EU, rather than protecting front-line services here?

The Prime Minister: We are part of a European Union of 27 members. I know that many people on the Opposition Benches do not like that fact, but one of the responsibilities of membership is that we provide resources for all members of the European Union, depending on our ability to pay. That is in the agreements that have been negotiated, and these agreements are in the interest of a country that trades 60 per cent. of its goods with the European Union, has 3 million jobs dependent on the European Union and has 750,000 companies that are involved with the European Union. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to indulge the anti-Europeanism of the Tory party, then let him do it, but I believe that the whole of the British nation sees the importance of our relationship with Europe.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Can the Prime Minister say whether we are training Afghans in bomb disposal and the use of robotics and other equipment to deal with IEDs, and whether, as we start to draw down and withdraw, we will leave the Afghans with the necessary equipment to do that job?

The Prime Minister: Yesterday I saw our British forces training the Afghan forces in the hand-held equipment that is necessary to detect IEDs. Most of the work that we are doing on IEDs with robotic equipment is done by British forces, but over time it must be our aim to train the Afghan forces, so that they can take

responsibility for the security of those districts and provinces. That, I believe, is the proper strategy for Afghanistan, andI hope that there will be all-party support for it.

Mr. David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Given the disclosure today of documents confirming that Iran has taken great strides in developing its nuclear weapon capability, is it not the reality that while the international community, and in particular the European Union, dithers, Israel, sooner rather than later, will feel compelled to repel the direct threat to its existence?

The Prime Minister: I think that the hon. Gentleman should reflect on the fact that the international community is attempting to show unity in the face of Iran. We are attempting to work with China and Russia, as well as with the other powers, to deal with what is a clear threat. The message to Iran must be, "Join the international community and renounce nuclear weapons, or face isolation from the international community", with the potential for sanctions if the Iranians do not, and it is a stronger message when put by all countries together.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With the United Kingdom sending more troops to Afghanistan than France and Germany combined, does the Prime Minister understand the concerns of my constituents that, while this country is fulfilling its responsibilities, others among our major European partners are not?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is right for us to do more in Afghanistan, and we are doing our best to contribute to the forces. I hope that the implication of his question is not that if France and Germany do not come up with the numbers, we should do less. I do not think that that is the case. What I believe should happen is that all countries in the alliance should look at what they can do and whether they can contribute more. Not just eight countries, which was the initial number of countries following us that I announced to the House a few weeks ago, but 38 countries are offering their help in Afghanistan as part of NATO and the coalition. We should welcome the fact that many countries are doing so. Announcements have yet to come from other countries, and I believe that they will come from some of them over the next weeks or months.

Let me repeat, so that everybody is clear about the money that we are spending on the equipment of our forces, that the Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, said:

> "The equipment...people are using is...the best that they've ever had".

I hope that the Conservative party will listen to that and follow his advice on that matter.

Personal Care at Home Bill

Second Reading

4.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a significant moment for the House, as it means that the long overdue reform of the funding of personal and social care in England is at last under way. Before we go any further, it is important to focus our minds on the people whom the Bill is intended to help. It will provide support to more than 400,000 of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies, including people with advanced conditions such as Parkinson's, dementia, Alzheimer's and motor neurone disease. They are people with the greatest needs, who require intimate personal care in all aspects of their daily lives. In many cases, they will already have paid significant sums out of their own pocket towards the costs of their care as their condition has deteriorated. Their families and carers will have faced considerable pressure in recent times as they have battled to get the help that they need, or sought to balance the demands of their own lives with looking after a loved one. Therefore, today, we are rightly focusing on those with the greatest needs, and on making their lives and the lives of their families and carers a bit easier.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way so early in his speech, but I must ask him why we are debating this Bill now, when we are in the middle of a consultation and waiting for clarification on what is going to happen with the National Care Service in England. Are we not jumping the gun a little by introducing just one part of a much grander scheme, which would be better debated as a whole?

Andy Burnham: The Green Paper has kicked off a long overdue debate about the funding of social care in England, but it is our judgment that we do not need to wait for the conclusions of the review before making the system fairer—

Mr. Ellwood: Then why have it?

Andy Burnham: We want to make the system fairer now for people in our communities with the greatest needs, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will endorse that as a laudable objective.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): To make this excellent Bill work better, we need to ensure that we can fund adaptations to homes—such as adapting baths to showers and installing stair lifts—quickly. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of the Royal British Legion and the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association to discuss the problems involved in getting this through, to ensure that the people who need those adaptations do not have to wait months and years for them, and that there is no discrimination between privately owned and publicly owned housing?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind words about the Bill. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for

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Corby (Phil Hope), would certainly be happy to have the meeting that he has requested. In a moment, I will talk specifically about help in the home and about spending on the adaptations and technology that might help people to live at home. Too often, there has been a divide over spending health resources in that way, and the Bill seeks to change that. I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman has said.

In addition to helping those who need care at home, the Bill will help those who are at a low point in their lives and at risk of needing long-term care—for example, people who have recently had a fall, an accident, a serious operation or a bereavement.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned that the provisions would benefit 400,000 people. The risk assessment that comes with the Bill makes it clear, however, that if we take those already getting reablement provision out of the equation, only 100,000 extra people will benefit from free personal care through the Bill. Does he agree that that is the correct figure, rather than 400,000, because the vast majority are already receiving help through the means-tested system?

Andy Burnham: In a moment, I will break down the precise figures on those who will benefit from the Bill. On reablement, it is important to say that these provisions will fund an expansion of reablement services, and we estimate that an extra 130,000 people will be helped through the use of a more preventive approach to social care, and a more intensive period of support when they are at a low point in their lives. I will come to the figures that the hon. Gentleman has raised in a moment, and show him that the 400,000 figure is a real one.

The Bill will provide powers for people to receive intensive support to prevent them from developing more serious needs. It will help them to remain healthy and independent in their own homes, and to extend their quality years of life. In helping these two distinct groups, the Bill therefore has two clear purposes. The first is to end the lottery in home care for the most vulnerable people in our communities. Today, help for people at home with the highest needs varies according to their postcode. The second is to make the existing system fairer now and pave the way for a bigger reform of social care in the next Parliament. Focusing on reablement and building a stronger preventive element into the system will provide a bridge to the forward-looking National Care Service that we seek to create.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet) (Lab): The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) was right to say that the Bill needs to fit into the grander plan, when it is eventually published. Is he not missing the point, however, that there are people struggling now, and that they cannot wait for the White Paper or for the Bill that will follow in the next stage after the general election? We have to do something to help those people now, and that is what the Bill is about.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I pay tribute to him as a former care services Minister for the work he did to take forward social care, particularly the improvements we have seen in the personalisation of care services in recent years. He is absolutely right that the story of social care reform is that this House has flinched or backed away when it has all got too difficult and has found a reason to put off the reform of the system. That is why today is so significant—we are at last facing up to the unfairnesses that exist today and we are focusing clearly on the people with the greatest needs, who in my view deserve a better deal than the one they currently receive.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I wonder whether the Secretary of State could explain to the House how he sees the Bill forming a bridge to a longer-term reform in the terms in which the options were presented in the Green Paper. The underlying proposition of the Bill is that free personal care should be provided to people at home. The Green Paper had an option of taxpayer-funded free personal care within it and the Government expressly ruled it out as being unfair in placing too great a burden on people of working age.

Andy Burnham: I repeat what I said a moment ago. The measure paves the way for a major reform of the system in two ways. First, it is fairer in terms of funding. The people we are talking about will in the vast majority of cases already have paid significant sums out of their own pockets as their condition has deteriorated. Any reform we are talking about in social care is about spreading that burden of the costs of care more fairly and not letting those who are dealt the hardest hand of cards in life and who face the greatest needs bear all the costs on their own. That was the principle that underpinned the creation of the national health service and we believe that the same principle should be valid here.

The second point I would draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to is the focus on reablement and prevention. It is very important that we find a better way of investing in people's good health—investing the resources we have on the health service side and in terms of council funding—to create a more forward-looking preventive system that is geared around promoting people's independence and good health and supporting them to stay at home. For those two clear reasons, I say to him that the Bill is a bridge towards the National Care Service that we wish to see.

Sixty-three years ago, this House voted to create the NHS to end the unfairness whereby people with the greatest needs faced the highest costs and the people who had the least were in danger of going without their needs being met at all. Today, the same unfairness exists in social care. If someone happens to develop dementia in old age, rather than cancer or heart disease, they are yet to find the "freedom from fear" that was the promise of the NHS. That was an enduring unfairness, which until now this House has failed to address. It becomes more and more evident as people live longer and we can no longer afford to ignore it.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): In being able to cross that bridge, there is obviously always the tricky issue of financing. There is some disquiet in local government that it is local councils that will have to find the bulk of this funding. In my own local authority in Croydon, 5 per cent. efficiency savings were secured—even better than the Government's target for it—so how can we cross the bridge with respect to that particular financial issue?

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention funding because it raises real challenges both at the national level and for local authorities, but he is not right to say that councils will be asked to find the majority of the funding. I have re-prioritised my budgets within the Department of Health to find the majority of the funding necessary. We are clear, however, that efficiencies and the potential for efficiencies have been identified within social care in local government that will enable local authorities to make a contribution to the costs of this care. There is already evidence from around the country that a stronger focus on prevention and reablement can help to save local authority resources in the long term.

As I said, the first aim of the Bill is immediate action for 280,000 people with the highest care needs, including those with advanced dementia, Parkinson's and other conditions. It does that by lifting the restriction in the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Act 2003 on the period of time for which councils can be required to provide free personal care for people living at home.

We know that many people want to remain in their own homes if possible. A 2004 survey found that most people expressed a preference for staying in their own homes, 62 per cent. with care and support from family and friends and 56 per cent. with care and support from trained care workers. Only last month, in its "Findings" series, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded:

"Older people most often move to a care home as a result of crisis, with no preparation and little or no planning. Most do not choose to be there."

Currently an estimated 80,000 older people in greatest need receive free personal care, but 40,000 pay part of their own costs and 50,000 pay all their costs. An estimated 90,000 younger adults receive free care, while 20,000 pay all or part of their own costs. The Bill will end that lottery, and remove the enormous and unfair financial burden on such people and their families.

Those figures answer the question asked by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) a moment ago. The Bill will provide free care for some people who are currently paying all or part of their costs, and it guarantees that all members of that category will receive it in the future. As the hon. Gentleman knows, under the current system a local authority could change the eligibility criteria and, at any point, bring some of the people who currently receive free care into the ambit of charges.

Norman Lamb: It is probably unlikely that a local authority would change the criteria to remove free care from those in the most critical need—given that we are discussing that category. Will the Secretary of State confirm that approximately 110,000 additional people, on top of those who currently receive free care—both younger and older adults—would benefit from the Bill, and that the 400,000 figure is not an accurate reflection of the number who would benefit?

Andy Burnham: Let me break down the figure for the hon. Gentleman. Currently, 170,000 people receive free care. It is important that he acknowledge that the Bill will safeguard their position in relation to charging in the future. A further 110,000 people are funding either all or part of their own care; the Bill will exempt them from charges. A further 130,000 people will benefit from the extra investment in reablement. That will be a recurring benefit, depending on who needs reablement in any given year. The Bill represents a significant step forward for all members of that category.

Let me give the hon. Gentleman a real example: that of an 89-year-old woman from Lowton, in my constituency. She lives alone in a one-bedroom flat. She is no longer independently mobile, is unable to prepare meals or manage her own personal care, and has impaired hearing in both ears. Relatives want her to be supported at home for as long as possible. They say that she would be devastated if she had to go into a care home. She has four visits during the day and one later in the evening, with two staff attending all visits to ensure safe moving and handling. The cost of the care package is approximately £500 per week, or £26,000 per year. As a result of the Bill, her care will be free.

Mr. Lansley: I am still confused about what the Secretary of State considers to be the purpose of the Bill. He seemed to argue at the outset that it was to give free personal care to those in greatest need, but he must surely know that many of those in greatest need have made substantial financial contributions and then go into long-term residential care. He appears to be offering nothing to them. In what way are they any different from those who receive care at home?

Andy Burnham: Let me repeat that the Bill has two purposes: to make the existing system fairer now, in the recognition that we cannot solve all the problems in advance of a major reform, and to prepare the ground for a more fundamental reform of social care in England which would encompass everyone, in all care settings. As I said a moment ago, it is important to create a system that helps people to live independently. In our view, that is the right way to create and reconfigure the system. I am surprised that the shadow Health Secretary is seeking to pick holes by asking, "Why aren't you doing everything now?" Surely it is right to do something now to help people in the greatest need, whose families are facing the greatest pressure as they seek to attend to their care needs, rather than to nit-pick by saying, "If it isn't a complete reform, it's not worth having." Our argument is that it is worth having, but we are also committed to reforming social care in the next Parliament, and I wonder whether the Conservative party is prepared to make a similar commitment.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) (Con): May we briefly pursue the costs issue? As I understand it, the Secretary of State is expecting local government to find £250 million a year from savings. What discussions has he had with other Departments that are also asking local government to make savings, and what will be the cumulative effect of his demand for £250 million along with those other Departments' demands? Also, how do they expect local government to find that money—or is that why a 4 per cent. increase in council tax is one of the measures in the pre-Budget report?

Andy Burnham: The hon. Lady raises a fair point. She rightly asks where the efficiencies will come from. My hon. Friend the Minister responsible for care services has been working with colleagues in local government on a use-of-resources guide, which clearly demonstrates

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how further savings can be found within social care, particularly by funding prevention services and helping people stay independently in their home. I will come on to an example from the Isle of Wight, where a Conservative-controlled authority has successfully invested in prevention and reablement, and thereby saved considerable sums of money. I shall not do so now, but I could cite examples of Conservative authorities that are doing the opposite—they are cutting social care. The hon. Lady asks me to update the House on where the savings can come from, which is a fair question, but we have identified that.

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): I believe that when the right hon. Gentleman was a Health Minister he made the point that the vast number of people in all our constituencies who work very hard on a voluntary basis to support families and friends save the state enormous amounts of money, and I wonder whether his analysis puts a value on that. More importantly, what support is he proposing to give to these individuals who are spending enormous amounts of their time to help relatives?

Andy Burnham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point: informal carers save billions of pounds that otherwise would have to be met by state-provided support. The actual figure has been costed by Carers UK and others, and it is huge. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Minister says that the sum is £80 billion. Carers do not see their care in monetary terms, however; they would always look after their loved ones.

Let me explain to the hon. Gentleman what is squarely my intention in respect of carers in reforming the system and bringing forward the National Care Service. We will always have to depend on their love and support for their families, but we can do better in making their life more tolerable, such as by letting them call down the support when they need it, rather than when the system says that they should get it. It is a fundamental part of any reform of social care that we provide to the many informal carers in this country the kind of back-up and support that makes being a carer tolerable and that allows them to balance that with all the other demands on their life. For me, that is a crucial aspect of creating a higher quality care system.

Mr. Newmark: The Secretary of State's comments will be extremely helpful to my constituents in Braintree. Each and every week I meet one or two people who give a lot of their time, and who ask me, "Can the state do more to help me, not on a financial basis, but on an enabling basis?" If the Secretary of State could give me one or two examples of how his Government will do that, that would be helpful.

Andy Burnham: I can give a very specific example. The hon. Gentleman may know that last year we asked primary care trusts to fund respite care for carers and for breaks, and I believe it was the first year that that requirement was included in the operating framework. Some analysis has been done, not least by the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, on whether that has been fully implemented around the country. I have been considering whether we can strengthen the language relating to that commitment as part of this year's operating framework.

That is a very direct example of how the health service is moving into supporting carers more directly—I think that was the point that the hon. Gentleman wanted me to answer—and it shows the specific, practical support that the health service can give. Hon. Members will know, if their constituencies are like mine, that respite care is under-provided for and that there is more we can do to give people those little breaks that make life tolerable. That was why we included that funding requirement in the operating framework of the NHS, and I assure him that we will be repeating it when the framework for next year is published.

Dr. Ladyman: My right hon. Friend might need to have a think about this point and come back to me on it. The Bill works by amending the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Act 2003, which provides that when somebody is discharged a carer's assessment also has to be carried out. If that assessment indicates that a carer needs additional support, within the framework of what we are doing today will we also fund the support of that carer?

Andy Burnham: We will certainly look at the detail of what my hon. Friend is saying. My initial response is that that would be included as part of the overall care plan that the individual would receive, but I shall respond to him in detail on that point to ensure that the carer's needs are properly taken into account.

Currently, all personal care at home is potentially a means-tested service; local councils can determine the amount people have to pay within national guidelines. Community care assessments are carried out to determine the level of a person's needs, based on the criteria laid out in guidance. Nevertheless, levels of support vary widely across the country, so this Bill is about creating a fairer system. We want to ensure that the support goes to those who need it most. It is estimated that of those who will benefit, some 60 per cent. are in the middle quintile of the income distribution of the general population, about 30 per cent. are in the second quintile and about 10 per cent. are in the bottom quintile.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State clarify his intentions on attendance allowance? He will know that when Scotland introduced free personal care, £30 million of attendance allowance was cut from the Scottish budget, and that got in the way of our being able to deliver our service. However, I believe that he intends that existing claimants in England will continue to secure their attendance allowance. Why the difference between Scotland and England?

Andy Burnham: I am sorry to say to the hon. Gentleman that this Bill does not deal with the reform of benefits. We debated that in the House last week, and the hon. Gentleman would have received very full answers to those questions had he been here. This Bill is not funded by the reform of attendance allowance or disability living allowance.

The beneficiaries of extending free personal care as proposed in this policy will be those on middle to below-middle incomes relative to the overall population. We believe that that will have a small, but positive, redistributive effect.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose—*

Andy Burnham: I shall give way in a moment, but this is an important point. The Bill answers one of the key issues identified by the 1998 royal commission:

"The Commission concludes that doing nothing with respect to the current system is not an option. It is too complex and provides no clarity as to what people can expect. It too often causes people to move into residential care when this might not be the best outcome. Help is available to the poorest but the system leads to the impoverishment of people with moderate assets before they can get any help."

The Bill is a direct answer to that criticism.

Mr. Hayes: The intervention by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) draws attention to an important aspect of the Bill and perhaps to a gap in it. When the legislation that this Bill amends was introduced in 2002, the Secretary of State at the time argued that it would bridge the gap between health and social care. However, if this Bill is inadequate in bridging that gap in the way that was inferred by the hon. Gentleman—the gap also applies to support for organisations that might facilitate or enhance care at home—it is surely premature and would have been better as part of a bigger Bill to take advantage of the opportunity to do exactly what the hon. Gentleman said and what was heralded with the introduction of the earlier legislation.

Andy Burnham: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but I believe that the Bill does exactly what he is calling for. It will drive further integration between health and social care. It will encourage the health service to spend more of its resources on supporting individuals in the home. In that way, it will help local government, which has too often been faced with a very difficult job in balancing resources at a local level to give people the support that they need. I do not say at all that this Bill is the final answer and the whole solution—it is not. We have said that it is a partial step that will move the system forward and make it fairer today, as well as make it more preventive in character. It is worth doing for those reasons, but I agree that we need more fundamental reform. We would look for support from the Opposition to reform the system more fundamentally. I believe that the demographics of the country now demand it. If we do not reform the system soon, the unfairnesses will grow year by year. I do not think that any of us would want to contemplate that prospect. Typically, the people who require personal care services are over 75 years old, live alone and are generally in poorer health. This measure is not just compassionate; it is progressive.

The second aim of the Bill is to help another 130,000 people by encouraging reablement support after a fall, when their health deteriorates or following a period in hospital. Reablement might mean adaptation to make a person's home wheelchair-friendly, the use of technology such as alarms or electronic pill dispensers to improve safety, or physiotherapy and personal support to help people learn how to perform daily tasks after illness or injury.

Mr. Lansley: The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. I merely seek a point of information. Can he explain why this legislation is required to provide reablement services?

Andy Burnham: This legislation is not required to provide reablement services. However, we are clearly linking it to the support provided to people receiving free personal care, as it will be a gateway to that support. We want to place the emphasis at all times in spending public money on encouraging prevention—on putting prevention at the heart of the system. We think that that is the correct link to make. If we are to consider somebody for free personal care in the home, we should first give them the opportunity of an intensive period of support. There is good and growing evidence from around the country that that support can reduce people's reliance on care and support down the line.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his clarification that the purpose of the reference to reablement in the legislation is not to provide reablement when people leave hospital after an operation, for example, but to make it a condition of their subsequent receipt of free personal care that they have accepted such reablement services. Would that apply to those who would currently receive free personal care on a means-tested basis—that is, would all those receiving free personal care be required to comply with that?

Andy Burnham: Strictly speaking, the Bill provides the local authority with discretion to provide that support, but that is clearly the direction in which we want to see care services develop. In answer to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) I used the example of the Isle of Wight, and it is an instructive example. It shows that by investing early on and supporting people better when they need it most, long-term reliance on care and support can be reduced.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way again. Does he accept that there are some cases in which a requirement of reablement would not be appropriate? For example, someone in their last days needs personal care but it would be entirely inappropriate to go through some false process of reablement that would not benefit that individual. I am concerned that councils might be in a position where they might exclude someone in those circumstances.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. There are some people for whom reablement, or intensive support, would not be appropriate. He gave as an example people who receive palliative care, and that is obviously true for them. Nobody would want anything in the Bill to place pressure on people or put them through a process that they must and should not go through. The regulations under the legislation will make that clear. Of course, the measures should not deny such people any support should they qualify under the relevant terms.

We believe that by investing in reablement we can prevent emergency admissions to hospital, prevent people from ending up in crisis situations and help people live independently in their homes for longer. I have mentioned the Isle of Wight a few times. It has had a 40 per cent. reduction in residential care placements since it introduced free personal care in the home. That work is already going on in other places and showing its worth. The Wirral is also taking a lead on investment in reablement services. Let me give an example.

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A 77-year-old woman who had been dependent on carers for two years was admitted to hospital for aortic valve surgery. She had got used to doing very little for herself; she was sleeping downstairs and was using a bowl of water in the lounge and a commode to meet her personal care needs. On discharge, she received three visits a day from the home assessment and reablement team to help her with personal care and meal preparation. The team helped her to practise using the stairs and encouraged her to undertake daily tasks such as opening the curtains, putting on the washing and making her own lunch. Over six weeks, the number of visits that were required gradually decreased, and she is now living happily and independently without any intervention from social services. Such inspiring examples show how we can help people to regain independence and how we can spend public money more effectively.

In that way, the Bill aims to enable people to retain their independence, as well as aiming to reduce costs and prevent ill health. It will help to ensure that people remain economically active by providing the support and control that families and carers need to balance work and caring. We want to build on the work that many councils have already begun on prevention and intervention to support people in living independently in the community. The Bill encourages, but does not require, councils to offer a reablement package. The offer of free personal care and better use of resources will push authorities to bring in alternative models of care and will embed prevention and reablement, all of which have been shown to be more cost effective and to offer better outcomes. That approach could help authorities to generate by 2013 the £250 million that early estimates suggest will be the additional cost of free personal care. It will reduce the cost of care for individuals, including those who continue to fund their own care, and will help people to stay independent. By extending a hand to those with lower-level needs, we can help to reduce isolation and help to keep people active. In doing so, we can prevent people from slipping to the point at which more intensive care and support are required.

There has been a great deal of speculation and misinformation about how the Bill will be funded, so I shall take this opportunity to explain our approach again in the clearest terms possible. The measures we are proposing will cost £670 million in the first full year, which will be provided entirely from the Department of Health budget and by local government. Some £420 million will come from the Department, and the remainder will be met by local authorities. That funding, along with the scope for further efficiency gains, will be considered as part of the normal spending review process. It is right that councils should play their part alongside central Government in helping to deliver the commitment on free personal care. We will be consulting on the distribution mechanism for local authorities. I repeat that it is completely incorrect to say that any of the money will come from cutting disability benefits or from cutting cancer research or any other important research.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Will the £250 million from local government be a one-off cost or a recurring cost year on year? I note that some of the money will come from the Department of Health's research, development, marketing and consultancy budgets. Will those be recurring or one-off costs, and is all this in the pre-Budget report?

Andy Burnham: Local government efficiency is in the pre-Budget report, and it is a recurring cost; but the savings are also recurring. It is about spending public money better than we do at the moment. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation acknowledged, too many people are pushed into residential care as a result of crisis, when actually with appropriate support they could be helped to regain independence. If we help someone to regain independence at that critical moment in their life, it is good not just for that individual but for the public purse, because it means that people do not require care in a residential setting in the long term.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) made a good point, which I am afraid the Secretary of State has not properly answered. In the pre-Budget report, the £250 million efficiency saving is scored as a reduction in residential care costs, but it is treated as a saving from local government that contributes to the overall level of efficiency savings. It is not disclosed in the PBR as additional expenditure elsewhere. Furthermore, from what the Secretary of State says, in 2010-11 there will on the face of it be a £210 million transfer from the NHS line in the departmental expenditure limit to the Department of Health line. That has not happened. Why not?

Andy Burnham: The savings identified in the pre-Budget report will remain with local authorities and can then be used to meet their contribution towards providing free personal care for those with the highest need, as we have said all along. Of course, there is an incentive for local authorities in the form of the extra resources I have found from central budgets in my Department, but as I said a moment ago, we believe that by making that investment we can make savings down the line. We believe that giving people intensive support at home can reduce overall costs to the public purse, as one of the hon. Gentleman's local authorities—the Isle of Wight—has discovered. Perhaps he should take a trip there and cheer up a bit.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC): Can the Secretary of State tell the House what the Barnett consequential from the spending will be for the National Assembly?

Andy Burnham: There is no Barnett consequential from the spending. It is spending that is already allocated and has been reprioritised.

Mrs. Lait: Will the redistribution of the money the Secretary of State has found from his departmental resources be done on the basis of the local government formula or on the basis of need in each local authority?

Andy Burnham: I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the Bill's impact assessment, which proposes a number of options for the distribution package. We are consulting on the best distribution mechanism. Obviously, there are always strong views in local government about whether a package should be needs-led or per capita. We shall want to work through those issues with local government—*[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Minister

is nodding. There is time for the Local Government Association to feed in its clear views, as I am sure it will, and we shall pay close attention to what it says.

Norman Lamb: The consultation on the regulations makes it clear that the sum available is finite—it will not be increased—yet the impact assessment makes it very clear that there are considerable uncertainties about total costs and the total numbers of people who may benefit and qualify for help under the Bill. If the cost is significantly more, what will happen? If the sum is finite, who loses out in those circumstances?

Andy Burnham: As I was saying to the shadow Health Secretary, there is discretion for local authorities under the Bill, but we have costed the Bill and we are absolutely clear about the people we expect to benefit from it. We are confident that the costings we have given will pay for the benefits that I have described this afternoon.

The Bill is about putting more money into the social care system now. I do not think that anyone in the House seriously disagrees—unless I am about to discover otherwise—with the fact that the measure is much needed, prudent and fair. It is targeted on those in England with the highest needs who face the highest costs. As I said earlier, many people have had to use their own funds to pay towards the cost of their care.

Reform of care and support is fiscally responsible in the long term. Failure to reform will lead to huge unmet need and pressure on public finances and public services in both the NHS and local government for years to come. The demographic pressure is rising. Year by year, more people will come into a care system that cannot fully cater for them. When the NHS was created there were eight working adults for every retired person. Today there are four. By 2050, that will figure fall to just two. We can expect that by 2026 there will be 1.7 million more adults in England who need care and support.

One in five of us will need care that costs less than £1,000 during our retirement. One in five will need care that costs more than £50,000, and in the worst cases the cost can exceed £200,000. We cannot predict our risk, so it is hard to protect ourselves against it. That is why we need a reform that shares the costs and risks of care and does not leave those in the most difficult circumstances facing catastrophic costs for care. The need for bold, far-reaching reform is undeniable. That is why we propose to create a National Care Service, and why we will bring forward a White Paper in the new year.

This is a major reform and, although it is essential, it will take time to deliver. *[Interruption.]* I hear the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) say from the Front Bench that it has taken time. We have not done nothing for the past 11 years. We have introduced major reforms to social care in England. We have introduced the dementia strategy, the drive towards personalisation and direct budgets, the Putting People First reform. We have had the prevention for older people pilots, which have laid the ground for the present reform. It is not as if we have been doing nothing. We have been taking steps to improve the system.

I did not hear whether the hon. Gentleman agrees that a fundamental reform in the next Parliament is necessary, but I shall be interested to hear whether he has the courage to commit to that. People have waited long enough. We are not saying that we have got everything perfectly right, but we have the courage and the confidence to introduce a Bill. In the interim we are introducing the Personal Care at Home Bill, recognising that those with the greatest needs cannot wait and should not be asked to wait to receive greater fairness. The Bill is not the whole answer, but it is a bold first step, and I commend it to the House.

5.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am sure the House is grateful to the Secretary of State for taking so many interventions with a view to our understanding not only the purpose of the Bill, but how it is intended to work. Although it is a short Bill, considerable complications arise from it.

The debate on the principles of the Bill takes place in the context of the Government's Green Paper and the reform of social care and support. There are two topics that hon. Members across the House would not want to leave out of account in considering how we should reform care and support for the future. First, we must continuously look beyond organisation and funding issues to understand the quality of the service being provided to people at home or in residential care homes. The Care Quality Commission report a fortnight ago on social care made it clear that a considerable proportion—about one in four—of care providers are not yet meeting the good or excellent standards that we would expect for ourselves or our relatives.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): Four hundred were poor.

Mr. Lansley: But many were only adequate, as the Minister with responsibility for care services knows very well. That is not a party political point. We need to ensure that quality is as good as any of us would expect for ourselves or our relatives.

The second thing that we need to do is well understood but not always achieved: we must be sure that we have the social care work force available to make that happen. That is affected by the esteem in which social workers are held, and by factors in the social care sector. It is not a well-paid sector, and it is rarely at the forefront of the public's mind when it comes to understanding what provides value in the community. However, it does provide important services on which we depend greatly. The presence of that work force is important, and it is important that we support it. I say that because in these debates we tend to focus on funding and organisation, but we must always look beyond that.

The Secretary of State, in his introduction to the Bill, said something that I echo: for 12 and a half years, which just happens to be the length of time that the Labour Government have been in office, the Government have failed to bring to care, support and long-term care funding the long-term structural reform that they repeatedly promised. It was in 1997 that, for example, Mr. Tony Blair said that he did not want to live in a country where older people had to sell their homes to pay for care. Some 13 years later, that is still precisely the situation.

Just after the 1997 general election, the Labour Government established the royal commission on long-term care, which reported in 1999. The Secretary of State said that this Bill was the direct response to that, but

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perhaps I have missed something, because my recollection was that a Labour Government had rejected the central recommendations of that royal commission.

Dr. Ladyman *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: I shall certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman. I do not recall him, when he was the Minister with responsibility for these matters, approving of what the royal commission said, but perhaps he will tell us otherwise.

Dr. Ladyman: I shall deal with that point if I manage to catch Mr. Deputy Speaker's eye later. First, I want to deal with the issue, constantly replayed by the Conservative party, that people have to sell their homes when they receive care. They have to do so because Conservative councils consistently fail to tell people that the money was given to those authorities to put a charge on people's properties so that they could be sold, if necessary, after their death. If Conservative councils actually told them about that, many more people would keep their homes.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman seems to be squirming because of the simple fact that Labour made a promise almost 13 years ago which has not been kept, and 45,000 people a year end up selling their homes to pay for their care. Many of them are already in long-term residential care. The issue is not whether their property is sold at the time that they enter care, while they are in care or, even, after they have died; for them, the issue is that they wanted everything that they had worked for, saved for and accumulated in assets throughout their whole lifetime not only to provide them with financial security, but to be a heritable asset for their families, and that simply has not happened.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: I have not really begun yet, but I shall of course give way in a minute.

I find the situation very strange, because over the past decade Scotland has increasingly demonstrated that a policy of free personal care is unaffordable. Indeed, colleagues from other countries in the United Kingdom are present, and owing to the circumstances in which the policy was applied in Scotland, it has cost a great deal more than the authorities intended and they have had to cash-limit it, introducing therefore just the kind of unfairness in terms of access against which the Secretary of State now rails. Furthermore, the policy does not meet the accommodation costs of those in long-term residential care, so those costs have also escalated. The policy has not made people feel the intended sense of financial security.

Those are all the reasons why a Labour Government said for many years that free personal care, as Scotland has offered it, is simply unaffordable in England and cannot be supported. I do not dispute that we supported that conclusion, because I made the same point myself. Indeed, a Government Green Paper published as recently as July said that to pay for the costs of care out of general taxation would impose an unreasonable burden on those of working age; that it would have a major, further distributional impact between generations and on those who continue to work; and that the Government therefore ruled it out. In July, as far as we were concerned, the Labour party was continuing to rule out free personal care, but in September the Prime Minister got up at the Labour party conference and said that he wanted to offer free personal care paid for out of general taxation.

There is no sense in which the Bill constitutes a bridge between the current position and the options in the Green Paper with which the Government are proceeding. They are talking about three options: the partnership model with universal care and a third of it paid for up front, a comprehensive insurance model, or an involuntary insurance model. Under none of the three models in the Green Paper would those with substantial or critical care needs have all their needs met out of general taxation.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman is not making a fair point. In any scenario under the reform options in the Green Paper, people with the greatest needs would receive more help than they receive today. I am not saying at this Dispatch Box that this Bill is the perfect reform, but I am saying that it will get more help now to the people who would be most helped under any more fundamental reform of the system. The point that he is missing is that those people have already had to dip into their own pockets to a significant degree to fund the costs of the care they are receiving. Our argument is that we should make it fairer for them now.

As regards Scotland, this is not the same proposal—it is about targeting help on people with the most critical needs, not paying for free personal care across the board, as is made available in Scotland.

Mr. Lansley: This is interesting. I understand the Secretary of State's point, but this is not an interim proposal towards long-term reform. It is perfectly okay for the Government to say, "This is something that we would like to do on its own terms. We think it is justified." I will go on to examine whether it is the appropriate priority for the resources to be used within the care and support context. However, it clearly cannot be construed as a bridge to any of the other proposals. Otherwise, the structure of support that would be offered would be intended not to provide free personal care but to provide for people with substantial or critical care needs some of their care for some period of time—or a proportion of it, such as a third or a quarter—free, universal and up front. That would be the logical corollary of the options set out in the Green Paper.

The proposal does not seem to bear any examination as a substantial measure of long-term reform. It prompts a question that the Secretary of State and I argued about last week. Surely it would be better for the Government to be clear about what they think the structure of long-term reform of care should look like, and for us to do the same, before the point at which this House is asked to spend a considerable sum of money, and to put in place legislation in a very particular form, without our having even seen what the Government's longer-term legislative intentions are and our having had the chance to set ours out in the same way.

Andy Burnham: Is the shadow Health Secretary comfortable with the fact that for people with the most critical care needs, their care is a lottery, with some

receiving all their care paid for, and some part funded? Is he saying that it is not worth making this change so that at least the most vulnerable people get care according to their needs, not their postcode?

Mr. Lansley: The Secretary of State is asking me to anticipate the rest of my argument. We have made it clear that we see a case for enabling people to have greater certainty. That is why at our party conference my colleagues and I proposed—*[Interruption.]* Every time we ask the Secretary of State to answer a question yes or no, he always gives us a long answer, which is never yes or no. I do not see why I should be any different.

We want to give people the opportunity to create greater certainty and to meet their costs. The question is what is the best way of doing it. In their Green Paper, the Government put forward options that include using disability benefits, forcing people to take insurance, or giving people the opportunity to take out insurance. We, for our part, made it clear at our party conference that we wanted to develop the opportunity for people to take out insurance but did not think it right to do that for every care need.

As I have said before, there is a good argument for offering people the opportunity to take out what we regard as affordable insurance not only for long-term residential care costs that place their home at risk, but for critical care needs, because the costs of care for those who are means-tested tend to accumulate and can deprive them of their assets. The Secretary of State must know that those are people who have significant cash assets and whose home is not at risk at the point in question. There may be a realistic and affordable opportunity to allow them, too, to offset their risks through insurance and have the certainty for which they are looking.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman concede that given that the average cost of care home fees is about £26,000 a year and that most people who go into care homes spend a little over two years there, his proposals for insuring against care home fees would effectively mean that for every one person who benefited, at least another seven would have invested in an insurance policy and got no benefit? The policy will require him to set the cost of care homes, set the quality and standards of them even more rigorously, and set eligibility criteria for those who go into care homes.

Mr. Lansley: As the hon. Gentleman has asked me that, I shall turn to something that I was going to say later. I agree with his last point: of course the policy will require there to be an objective assessment of need to enter long-term residential care, otherwise insurance providers would run the risk of people choosing to go into residential care when they did not require it. However, I do not agree with his interpretation of the numbers. I have set out clearly that we are operating on the basis of people paying about £8,000 at age 65. There is then a considerable period before the average point at which people enter care, which will allow that fund to accumulate. As he says, about £25,000 or £26,000 is the current figure per year, for just over two years on average, which means that there will be a cost of about £50,000 a person for the one in five who enter long-term care—£10,000 per person insured—to be funded by the approximately £8,000 that they originally paid in, which will have accumulated more over a period of time. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to make it clear that the numbers are straightforward.

Norman Lamb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: I will, and then I had better get on with the Bill itself.

Norman Lamb: Will the hon. Gentleman concede that, just as the criticism of the Bill is that it is a partial solution with the potential for perverse effects, exactly the same criticism can be applied to his proposal? It could end up affecting behaviour and pushing people in a direction that might not be the most rational for them as individuals.

Mr. Lansley: I understand that it is important for us not to have a perverse incentive that means that people who should be in long-term residential care are not, and that they are instead being looked after at home in ways that are not necessarily in their best interests. There are clearly worries about that. Many families and individuals make the decision for their older relative, partner or spouse to be in long-term residential care most reluctantly and when it is in their best interests to be there. We should not create an ideological fixation on people not being in long-term residential care. We should operate on the basis of what is in the best interests of older people themselves.

Equally, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should not seek to create a perverse incentive for people to be in long-term residential care because there is not adequate support in the domiciliary context. That is why, as I have just said, we should consider the opportunity of extending the voluntary insurance concept to critical care needs in domiciliary care. In the circumstances that we have described, with an affordable insurance market to meet the costs of long-term residential care, insurance providers will have an incentive to help people stay at home rather than go into long-term residential care, so we can begin to create the broader insurance system that I understood underlay one of the Government's options in the Green Paper. To that extent, although we clearly have problems with the Government's Green Paper, we have not said that we are not prepared to use it as a basis on which we can develop our own proposals. We have already done so, and we helpfully added to the proposals at our party conference, as I described.

The Bill is very short. It contains only one substantive clause, containing a number of amendments of previous community care legislation. As I shall explain, I fear that it has significant flaws and that there are significant unanswered questions. Of course, it is undercosted and as yet unfunded. Essentially, the local government component is simply to say to local authorities, "Here is this additional statutory obligation. By the way, you'll find the money for it won't you?" Local government has been through such a process many times before. The Government seem to be engaging in double counting. On Wednesday of last week, they were telling local authorities to achieve those efficiency savings and scoring them as part of the reduction of the deficit; this week they are presenting legislation that scores the same efficiency savings but then tells local authorities they have to spend them. They cannot have both.

[Mr. Lansley]

We need clarity on the future of social care. The Secretary of State keeps asking whether our intention is to reform social care after the election, but why is he so fussed about that if he is confident of being in office then? He clearly is not. There is something deeply ironic in saying, after 13 years of a Labour Government who have not achieved the reform of social care, "It's about time a Conservative Government who are committed to the reform of social care came in."

We have had 13 years in which hundreds of thousands of older people have had to sell their homes to pay for care, contrary to Labour's promises; 13 years of rising costs and, as the Office for National Statistics has demonstrated, falling productivity in social care; and 13 years of decreasing council-arranged care, when the proportion of people with moderate and lower care needs has been falling. Now, months before a general election, having said for 13 years that providing people with free personal care was unaffordable and unattainable, the Labour Government say it is their priority; and now, lo and behold, they suddenly say that they can find the money, starting in October 2010. It all fits into the same pattern that we heard so much of from the Chancellor in his pre-Budget report—make the Government virtuous, oh Lord, but not yet.

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend, with typical, measured and moderate understatement—the sort of understatement that he personifies—is making the charge against the Government that the Bill is political. I would go further, and I hope he might join me: is this not about vulnerable people staying in their home, but about one vulnerable person staying in his home—namely, the Prime Minister in Downing street?

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. At the time of the Queen's Speech, the Prime Minister described the Bill as one of his flagship pieces of legislation; in truth, it is more like a life raft or an attempt to keep the Labour Government afloat.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that if there is a March election, as is rumoured, the Bill will hardly be on the statute books, never mind implemented? What is the point of talking about this Bill now, when as he knows, we need a real reform?

Mr. Lansley: It is not for me to speculate on election timings.

Phil Hope: Go on!

Mr. Lansley: The Minister tempts me, but I will not do so. The hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) asks about a March election. For that to happen, it must be called at the end of February, but the consultation on the regulations on this legislation will conclude only on about 23 February. Clearly, the Bill is more about propaganda for a general election than the delivery of social care reform after it.

None the less, we are debating the structure of care reform. There are two serious problems with some of the options presented in the Green Paper. First—I will not go on at great length about this because we debated it in Opposition time last Tuesday—there is serious difficulty with the Government's intention to integrate disability benefits into the National Care Service funding. Of course, the Government did a U-turn last Tuesday and completely changed the proposal to integrate for current benefit recipients. It is fascinating that the Government are now proposing that over-65s who receive attendance allowance—let us say £60 a week on average—and disability living allowance should have that money taken away, so that it can be given to the local authority and then given back to them to spend in exactly the same way.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): With no loss.

Mr. Lansley: Apparently that will happen with no loss in transaction costs in the process. That is absurd. We know why the Government have ended up in that position. Under pressure, they did a U-turn but, to put it gently, it has left them looking very exposed.

For the longer term of the introduction of the reforms, the Government intend to integrate those disability benefits to pay for the up-front, universal entitlement to care. The effect would be to take away a cash benefit that recipients can use to meet a range of needs and costs and to substitute a care package. From our point of view, that remains unacceptable. We need to buttress and strengthen the right to control, and to personalise, care services, and continuing access to a cash benefit remains important for that to happen.

In response to the Secretary of State's statement on the Green Paper in July, I said that it is important to reach a common assessment of need—one that informs the non-means-tested cash benefit and the means-tested or insurance-funded social care entitlement. As with the extension of personal health care budgets, care users need the assessment process overall to become simpler and more integrated, for the resulting budgets and assessment processes that arise to be applied flexibly to meet their needs, for there to be a choice of providers, and for the assessment of need to be portable, as people will inevitably move around the country.

Andy Burnham: In simple terms, will the hon. Gentleman explain how a single assessment process can work for both a universal benefit and a means-tested social care system?

Mr. Lansley: Yes. In simple terms—I shall repeat the language I used—I am talking about an assessment of need; it is not an assessment of entitlements. Of course, entitlements will depend, nationally, on a cash entitlement on the one hand, but on the other on a local authority's decision and discretion about what it provides for what level of need. However, a single assessment of need seems to me to be perfectly understandable. Perhaps the Secretary of State should explain that to his former colleague, and I will come to what the noble Lord Warner said in another place in due course.

The second problem we have with the options in the Green Paper—

Phil Hope: What about the Bill?

Mr. Lansley: According to the Secretary of State, the Bill is supposed to be associated with the Green Paper and to be a bridge to it.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) for reminding me that the noble Lord Warner said:

"We need a more bipartisan and coherent approach than is provided for in this Bill...I am resigning myself to the fact that many of us will have to try to make the Bill more sensible and realistic about costs and funding arrangements",

and I agree.

He continued:

"Good places to start would be some national rules on service eligibility criteria to avoid a postcode lottery and making local assessments of individuals portable to other areas." [*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 November 2009; Vol. 715, c. 541-42.]

So the idea of portability of assessment is rightly being pursued in the other place.

The second difficulty with the Bill is that the Government just do not seem to have an idea of how many informal self-funders there are. The Local Government Association, in its response to the Bill, said:

"We are concerned that the actual number of beneficiaries (and therefore costs) could turn out to be very different from the Government's estimates. The Impact Assessment which accompanies the Bill provides little reassurance. We are particularly concerned that the estimated number of people with high care needs who self-fund their care may be too low."

Counsel and Care said, similarly:

"We need to see exactly who will be helped as a result of free personal care at home. To this end, the following areas require further definition...what are 'critical' as opposed to 'substantial' care needs, what 'personal care at home' will cover in full, when the NHS should step in and fund the care."

Age UK said:

"We would like clarification about the definition of personal care at home, especially when services described may be better delivered outside the home or where personal budgets are currently used to deliver similar outcomes. There is significant uncertainty about the true costs of the proposals as we do not know how many people who do not currently receive services might come forward."

That is why we cannot have any confidence about what the cost of this Bill will be. By their own admission, the Government have nothing other than a gross estimate—a generalised estimate—of how many people are receiving informal or family care, or who are self-funding but not using council-arranged care. The evidence from Scotland demonstrates that large numbers of those people start to become claimants of free personal care if it is offered to them.

The Bill appears to be unfunded. In the explanatory notes to the Bill, which sometimes explain and sometimes do not, I was astonished by a sentence in paragraph 17:

"The Government's view is that the Bill has little overall effect on public sector manpower and public expenditure."

So £670 million—on the Government's estimate—is of little effect. Convert that figure into dollars and we really have arrived at a billion here or a billion there. Soon that adds up to real money, but that does not seem to matter to the Government.

Where will that money come from? In response to an intervention, the Secretary of State seemed to be completely unable to explain why, in last week's pre-Budget report, what should have been represented as a £200 million transfer from the NHS in England into the Department of Health's expenditure simply does not appear in the Red Book. I am astonished that the Secretary of State could not explain that. He was at pains to mention the "myths" about where the money would come from, so perhaps he can explain where it will come from. He has been quoted as saying that some £60 million of it will come from "lower priority research projects". Which are these lower priority projects? Which such projects did the Government see fit to fund in the first place?

I have seen a long list of research projects, and the Government used to make considerable play of the fact that they had increased the NHS research and development budgets. Which advertising campaigns will the Secretary of State stop to pay for this Bill? Will it be tobacco control, the current swine flu campaign, next year's seasonal flu campaign, the sexual health campaigns or the Department's contribution to "Frank", the drug campaign? And which local authority activities will contribute the £250 million? On the face of it, the Government are arguing that it will come from a reduction in residential care home payments, but the impact assessment does not suggest that anything like that number of people will switch from residential care. The Department think that only 2,700 people would transfer from residential to domiciliary care.

Nor does the Green Paper offer a credible way forward in relation to insurance funding. The compulsory process is not really a basis for consensus because, in effect, it would just transfer into compulsory insurance something that would, to all intents and purposes, be just a taxation per head. Compulsion and tax amount to much the same thing.

Mrs. Lait: Would my hon. Friend be prepared to speculate on the cost of staffing for the intensive rehabilitation that will be required, including new occupational therapists, physiotherapists and psychologists?

Mr. Lansley: There is no evidence in the impact assessment that any of this has been thought through. All that is included by way of costs is the Government estimate that it will cost £1,000 per person, made up of 30 hours at £30 an hour. But Governments wishing to provide additional services have to think about the inclusive costs. They cannot say that the marginal cost of trained staff is £30 an hour, because they have to think about the average costs over the long run. They have put marginal costing in the assessment on the basis that, magically, all those staff would be available from October 2010. We know that that will not necessarily be the case.

It is important to be clear about what we want to see forming part of this consensus. I do not wish to give the impression that we oppose everything about this Bill—or its purposes. We have made it clear that we need a much more preventive focus on the shape of social care for the longer term. The NHS and local authorities can and should come together to deliver better preventive services. Those should not be confined to reablement, and the measures that often work best—as we have seen from examples—are telecare, telemedicine and home adaptations, for example, which are being done early rather than just waiting until people have had falls or operations and have to be discharged home.

Mr. Syms: Much of the care given to the elderly in their own homes is by relatives, who are often excluded from being paid for undertaking that service. Is there

[Mr. Syms]

not a danger that some of those relatives will use the Bill as an opportunity to withdraw and allow their contribution to be picked up by paid people? Is there not an argument that spending money on respite care for relatives might be a cheaper and better option than paying for the salaries of staff caring in people's homes?

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need to guard against the risk of diminishing the contribution that informal and family care can make, as that can often give the care recipient the greatest sense of security and well-being. That is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and I have been so keen on the extension of emergency and planned respite care. The money that the Princess Royal Trust said had been allocated by the Government has not all got through, but it is important that it is used for that purpose. The big picture, as I was saying, is that, wherever possible, we have to give care recipients and their families the opportunity to use personal budgets to help to make that happen. The Secretary of State talked about direct payments, but they are used in a very small minority of cases—some 4 per cent. of total adult care recipients. That is a very small start. It is important that we develop the concept of personalisation and bringing those budgets together to make it happen.

Norman Lamb: Returning to the costing of reablement, the hon. Gentleman described costing as taking place on the basis of a certain number of hours multiplied by the number of people who will benefit. Is it his understanding, as it is mine, that there is no assessment of the cost of adaptations or of equipment, telecare and so forth, which may well be a fundamental part of the package of reablement to enable the person to remain at home? That appears to be out of the equation.

Mr. Lansley: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—there is no reference to that. Indeed, this is one purpose of the proposals that we have been discussing for some years: creating a public health service that operates with dedicated funding for public health from within the NHS, and, indeed, local authorities working together.

More recently, the hon. Gentleman's party has joined in with the concept. Of course, this is precisely where we can begin to consider some of these programmes: the benefits accrue not only in the community at large and to those families, but to local authorities and the NHS, which makes a good case for investment on the part of the public health service as it is not simply confined to the question whether it offsets hospital admissions. That is often the narrow basis on which the NHS judges these things.

We have seen programmes such as a telecare programme in Scotland that achieved savings of £11 million from 7,900 older people and an improvement in their reported quality of life; a community alarm service in Birmingham that showed a substantial return on investment and reduced residential care need; and telecare schemes for frail older people in north-west Surrey, which showed that telecare focused on safety and security reduced the number of people entering residential care by 11 per cent. in the fifth year after implementation.

Those are not necessarily reablement examples. It is important for us to consider these preventive opportunities on their merits, through evaluation, and to implement them as part of a proactive public health service. I am surprised at the narrowness of the Government's approach to reablement alone. I am also uncertain as to why they see it as necessary to link access to free personal care to an obligation previously to have agreed to a reablement process.

As I mentioned, partnership is clearly a necessary part of the consensus that we now need to pursue. From my point of view, that includes local government. Frankly, central Government should treat local government as a partner, which means consulting on such approaches and saying to local government, "On average, across the country, you are paying 40 per cent. of the cost of adult social care. We will treat you as a partner and discuss how we will reform this for the longer term, recognising that council tax payers and their elected representatives provide a substantial proportion of the funding, and in many local authorities more than 50 per cent. of the funding, for social care."

In those circumstances, it is outrageous that the Government published a Green Paper in July and then said something completely different in September, the implication of which was that local government would simply have to pay up or be taken to court.

Mr. Hayes: Surely my hon. Friend is not suggesting that the Secretary of State has neither sought nor received representations from local authorities? It is inconceivable that he would move ahead with such speed without showing that diligence, for, as my hon. Friend suggests, this will have considerable repercussions for local authorities of all political flavours.

Mr. Lansley: Just to help my hon. Friend, I should say for the record that he speaks in an ironic fashion—and so the record will show. I do not know whether the Secretary of State had any choice in the matter, and I am not sure that the Prime Minister intended that local authorities would have much choice.

The consultation has gone out. It is not about whether the Bill should be introduced or its principles; nor is it based on its economic modelling. It is not based on the underlying argumentation. The consultation is based on a practical question: if the Government are to distribute money for this purpose, is it best to do it on this measure of need, or that measure of the number of older people with particular characteristics? That question is perfectly reasonable; it just assumes that local authorities have no say whatever in whether the service should be provided or how they should exercise discretion about it.

It seems to me that a consensus is available, if the Government wish to proceed on the basis of consensus. There is a consensus on the necessity for prevention and preventive processes. Therefore, we agree that reablement should indeed form part of these proposals, but it should not be the only preventive measure. There is a consensus on personalisation, but much more needs to be done. We see access to cash benefits as an essential part of that. There is a need for partnership—in our view, a partnership with local government, with discretion for local government in deciding how council tax payers' money is used. That is essential. The Green Paper itself says that if elected representatives are to decide how

council tax payers' money should be used, they must have some discretion in that. From our point of view, that partnership should also include the opportunity for people to protect their home and their assets through a voluntary process of insuring against those risks.

Does the Bill provide any of those things? Not too many. I say that the Bill might be flawed because its stated purpose is to provide free personal care beyond the six-week point. I did not notice the Secretary of State explaining the Bill in these terms, but let us get to this point. The Government are proposing virtually to abolish consideration in Committee, so we might as well have some of that debate now.

The Government propose the abolition of the six-week limit on the time during which free personal care can be provided at home. Simply removing the limit would allow free personal care to be provided to people whether they were at home or in long-term residential care, but the Government have introduced a further restriction in clause 1(2), whose effect is that this will not apply

"to a person living in accommodation that an establishment provides to the person together with the care".

The effect of that is to exclude people living in long-term residential care who receive both accommodation and care together.

The Government argue in the explanatory notes that the restriction means that people living in care homes will not get access to personal care. I put a perfectly reasonable question to the Secretary of State, which he did not satisfactorily answer: why are people who go into long-term residential care with high care needs to be discriminated against in this way, compared with people who stay at home? None the less, we shall leave that question on one side.

For the sake of argument, let us say that there is a legitimate distinction to be drawn. However, the Government then say, "But people who live in sheltered accommodation or extra care housing are not to be excluded." We have arrived at the position where they say, "Why is this so?" On extra care housing, the explanatory notes state:

"The accommodation and care provided in such accommodation are not provided together but under separate arrangements made by the individual."

Fine. We know what is going to happen, do we not? As soon as legislation of this kind is introduced, large numbers of care services providers that currently make provision by way of a single contract with people—one that provides accommodation and care together—will suddenly find it necessary, no doubt for business reasons, to provide different, separate contracts for accommodation and for care services.

Providers will say to the Government, "If people are in extra care housing and they have two contracts, one for care and one for accommodation, they are eligible for free personal care that pays for their personal care needs. I am a care provider. I have a contract for accommodation and a contract for care services. I want exactly the same services provided to me." For the life of me, I cannot see how that evident flaw in the legislation can be reconciled. At best, we will end up with an enormous distortion to the care market, with large numbers of care providers recreating their services so as to distinguish between accommodation and care.

Dr. Ladyman: I am keen to help the hon. Gentleman reconcile that point, because I am keen to promote extra care accommodation. With extra care accommodation, the individual lives in their own home, as either a tenant or the owner of that property; they do not live in somebody else's home and receive care. If it were possible for people to change the premise on which they lived in residential care in order to achieve the same objective, they would have been doing that all along, in order to avoid having the value of their property taken into account when their care needs are assessed.

Mr. Lansley: No, I am sorry, but I just do not accept that that is the case. I have visited extra care accommodation, and it is perfectly clear that many people are there on the basis of tenancies. The whole point of extra care is that as the years progress, so the accommodation that people live in can shift in that complex. They might begin living in their home, as it were, in extra care housing, but as time goes on and their care needs become critical, they may find that adaptations are made or they might even move to different accommodation in that extra care development. The point is that it is perfectly obvious that people who are trying to access free personal care will restructure their arrangements in order to try to make that happen.

Dr. Ladyman: I think that the hon. Gentleman is talking about a specific type of accommodation—usually a retirement village—where, instead of buying a particular property, people buy an equity stake that allows them to move around. However, in the vast majority of extra care accommodation, people are either leaseholders or tenants in a wider property. If he doubts me, I am quite happy to take him round a whole slew of such properties, so that he can see the benefits of extra care and become a convert to such accommodation.

Mr. Lansley: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman completely misunderstands what I am saying. I am not disputing the benefits of extra care housing. What I am disputing is the fact that, in their contrivance that free personal care will be available to people with critical care needs who live in extra care housing, the Government, whether intentionally or not, are creating a potential loophole for people who are currently in long-term residential care, who would not be regarded as being in extra care housing. They will inevitably restructure their arrangements at the point at which they enter care in order to make themselves eligible for free personal care, by distinguishing the accommodation element from the care element. The Bill does nothing to prevent that from happening. That seems to be an obvious flaw in the legislation.

The Bill is not well thought through, but is it well costed? Let us have a look at its impact assessment, which has one or two obvious flaws. On page 2, it manages to state that the average annual costs and benefits are exactly the same—£670 million—even though the total benefits are calculated as being £454 million more. Given that the Government are arguing—on the first page of the impact assessment—that the total benefits are greater than the costs, one would have thought that the average annual benefit would therefore be greater than the cost. That might be a simple error in how the impact assessment was transcribed, but as the care services Minister, signed it and the error was on

[Mr. Lansley]

page 2 of what he signed, he might also be able to explain why that should be the case.

It is also estimated in the impact assessment—based on what evidence we do not know—that 10 per cent. of the flow into residential care will switch to home care. On page 15 of the impact assessment, the net flow into residential care is stated as being 178,000 older people a year, 10 per cent. of which would be 17,800. However, in the table calculating the costs by reference to the number of people who would access free personal care, the figure referred to by the Government is not 17,800 a year, but just 2,384. Such a large difference in the number of claimants would mean an extra £77 million a year to provide free personal care that has not been taken into account.

In calculating the benefits of the policy in the impact assessment, the Government admit that most of the cost is a straight transfer payment from taxpayers for the benefit of those who have previously paid for care themselves. The calculation of the benefit of that is based on two elements. The first is the equity assumed to be gained by transferring cost from the general population to older people who fall into, on average, lower segments of income distribution in the population; therefore, there is a distributional equity gain over the population as a whole. Unfortunately, the calculations in the impact assessment are mathematically incorrect. They also use the upper weightings of the Treasury Green Book, rather than the mid-point averages. If those two things were corrected—the mathematics and the use of the mid-point averages—the overall benefit of that element would be reduced to zero.

The second element is the assumption that people benefit because they would pay extra for certainty, in the same way that they pay extra for the certainty reflected in an insurance premium. In the impact assessment, the Government use US health insurance as a proxy for UK personal care insurance. They therefore assert that the medical loss ratio on health insurance would apply equally in this country to personal care insurance. Both points are wrong. There is no justification for making the assumption that health insurance is treated by people in the same way as personal care insurance. We know that that is so here, because we do not have a market for social care insurance; as things stand, people are not willing to pay for that certainty, whereas large numbers of people are willing to pay a premium for medical insurance in circumstances where, frankly, they often do not need to.

The difference between health insurance and personal care insurance is perfectly obvious, but in any case, the Government assume in their Green Paper that only 20 per cent. of people would pay voluntarily for care insurance. If we simply reduced the benefit to 20 per cent.—at the moment, the Government have assumed that everybody getting personal care would have valued it as if they had been willing to pay for personal care insurance—the overall benefit in the calculation would be reduced from £365 million to £51 million. The overall effect of reducing those benefits—the benefits that justified the cost-benefit analysis in the impact assessment—is that the total costs exceed the benefits. In addition, when the £402 million opportunity cost of raising the taxation required to fund the measure is taken into account, as it should be, the policy has a significant cost in excess of the benefit.

Of course, the care services Minister was no doubt untroubled by any of those thoughts when he signed the impact assessment on 22 November. I am sure, therefore, that he will wish to disclose in full to the House his scrutiny of the impact assessment in responding to this debate. If he does not do so, he will doubtless want to do so in response to the freedom of information request I made today, asking him what questions he asked on the impact assessment before he signed it.

This is a short Bill, but it requires amendment to become much more flexible if it is to help in the longer-term process of delivering social care reform. It needs to accommodate insurance-based solutions. Amendments are also required to make much clearer the range of preventive measures and solutions that can be provided by local authorities. As I have said, the Bill also seems to have a serious potential flaw, in that it would distort the care market. It therefore also needs to show flexibility regarding domiciliary care and long-term residential care.

Members of the Labour party in another place have been pretty critical of the Bill. Lord Lipsey said:

"There was this Green Paper process going on, and then came along what somebody somewhere dubbed the Exocet:"—

I am not sure who dubbed it the Exocet; perhaps he did—

"the Prime Minister's conference speech in which he proposed free personal care for all at home...the suspicion is born that it owed less to a careful policy consideration and more to the natural desire of all politicians to have a nice announcement to put in their conference speech."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 November 2009; Vol. 715, c. 546.]

In the same debate, Lord Warner said:

"I do not see it as likely to be a particularly useful stepping stone to the wider reforms that the Government were...engaged on. It is not thought through and, to many people, it looks like a political gimmick."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 November 2009; Vol. 715, c. 541.]

The Government could of course close their ears to criticism now and use their majority to push the Bill through the House of Commons, but it would then get bogged down in the House of Lords. Alternatively, they could make time available to work with us in this place to try to make the Bill a genuine bridge towards the reform of long-term care and support, to make it enabling rather than prescriptive on the structure of care and funding, and to allow it to promote a portable assessment of need and financial support, with a continuing central role for local authorities in commissioning and funding social care services in their areas. It is clear that local authorities and the NHS must be partners in this, and that they must enable individuals to exercise greater control. The last thing we need is what the *Health Service Journal* described last week as a takeover grab by the NHS for adult social care, or for primary care trusts to become responsible for all the commissioning activity and all the budgets.

The Bill needs amendment and further consideration in this place. We will not divide the House on its principle, but it must be made flexible. That means it should be given time in Committee and on Report in this House not only to investigate what it actually means—the need for that is becoming more evident as

we ask questions—but to amend it. The programme motion seems offensive in terms of parliamentary scrutiny. The Government seem to be making the assumption that, because the Prime Minister stood up at the Labour party conference and announced something, it should be passed through this House without scrutiny or question. The Prime Minister does not control the other place, but it is an abuse of this House for the Government to behave in that way.

The Bill is required to be considered in Committee before its Report stage, and it needs to be reported to the House in the normal way, with an opportunity for further amendment and debate after adequate further reflection. So, although we shall not divide the House on the principle of the Bill, we shall divide on the programme motion later this evening.

6.32 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet) (Lab): The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) described this as a short Bill, but it seemed to require him to make an inordinately long speech. In fact, his speech reminded me of the restaurant at the end of the universe in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy", especially when he talked about the Conservatives' proposals to pay for residential care costs by putting £8,000 into a fund that would somehow make it grow in real terms to over £50,000. In "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy", customers paid the exorbitant cost of their meal at the restaurant at the end of the universe by putting one penny into a bank account which earned compound interest over an almost infinite amount of time. By the time they had reached the end of the universe, they had amassed enough money to pay for their meal. There seems to be no way in which £8,000 can be put into any sort of fund and increase to £50,000 in real terms over 20 years. If the hon. Gentleman could tell me where to find such a fund, I would be very grateful. I would certainly put some of my savings into it as soon as possible.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that, if the free personal care that we are discussing involved the entirety of personal care, it would be unaffordable. The Bill is not proposing to provide all personal care free to everyone, however. It proposes to provide a very small subset of people with free personal care. It proposes to provide the people with the most urgent and the most serious needs with relief now. To that extent, the Bill is a first step on the road to producing the National Care Service that the Government have talked about, and which I fully support. The fact that it is a first step, however, does not mean that it should not be carefully considered, or that we should not know anything about the other steps involved. I shall make a few comments about those in a moment.

I congratulate the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Phil Hope), and the Government on some of the elements that they have identified, especially in the explanatory notes, rather than in the Bill itself, as the Bill is a rather simple mechanism designed to achieve its ends. The Government recognise explicitly the benefits of extra care accommodation, of telecare and of encouraging independent living. Members on both sides of the House ought to be able to agree that those are laudable objectives.

I have been campaigning on extra care accommodation for some time. Last Thursday, I attended the conference of the Association of Retirement Housing Managers, many of whom promote extra care accommodation. We need to recognise its benefits in reducing the cost of delivery of care and improving the welfare of older people. I encourage the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, who seemed completely to misunderstand the benefits of such care, to give further consideration to that mechanism of providing accommodation and care to older people.

There is one key point that I want to put to my hon. Friend the Minister. The subject was also mentioned by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, and I agree with him on this. We need to understand where this first step fits into the totality of the reforms that we are ultimately going to have to agree on. I want to highlight a concern relating to the three funding models in the Green Paper that are being actively considered. They are the so-called partnership model, the voluntary insurance model and the comprehensive model. I can see how the arrangements proposed in the Bill would fit with the partnership model, in that that model explicitly says that the state will provide part of people's personal care. I can also see how they would fit with the comprehensive model, which would involve everyone having to take out an insurance policy.

My concern is that the arrangements in the Bill might not fit very well with the insurance model. People would have to assess the risk when deciding whether to take out insurance. They would have to strike a balance and decide whether it was worth their while to take the risk, or whether they should take some of their capital and buy an insurance policy with it. When there was no free personal care and it was means-tested except for the poorest people, the risk assessment would have come out in favour of taking up an insurance scheme if one became available. However, if we say that the state is going to provide free personal care for the most needy, I worry that that might tip the risk balance the other way, and that people might decide to take a chance. They would know that, if their needs became particularly serious later in life, the state would step in, so I do not see how the proposals would fit in with the insurance model.

That is important because we need to find a way of leveraging some part of people's personal equity into meeting the cost of social care in the future. As we have all said, free personal care provided entirely by the state would be unaffordable. We therefore have to ask ourselves how we are going to leverage more money into the process. It could be done through higher taxes, or by finding ways of encouraging people to put part of their equity into the process. My favourite way of doing it, which I do not think any party is proposing at the moment, would be to use a hypothecated inheritance tax to meet the cost of social care. Instead of getting into the rather unfortunate bidding war over who was going to do the most to reduce inheritance tax liabilities, I would have proposed keeping part of the tax back to pay for social care. We could then have provided a much more comprehensive system. Such a tax would also be progressive, in that it would be related to people's wealth.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): My hon. Friend says, as so many Members do, that free long-term care is unaffordable, but that assumption is based on the

[Kelvin Hopkins]

present levels of tax. If we raised taxes and redistributed a bit more, it would be affordable. It is a question of whether we decide that it is affordable, not whether it is affordable objectively.

Dr. Ladyman: I accept that it is objectively true that if we raised tax, we could afford it. My hon. Friend and I have had the debate many times before as to whether people would accept that level of tax increases, particularly if it were income tax or taxes on earnings. I personally do not believe that they would; I know that he is a strong advocate of the case that they would accept it if they knew that it was going clearly into social care—that is the difference of opinion we have. That is exactly why my preferred solution to the problem would be a hypothecated inheritance tax. I think that that would be far more acceptable to people at large than extra tax on earnings, but that is a debate for another day.

When the Minister winds up the debate, I want to hear how he sees this Bill fitting into the wider reform. If he cannot tell us today because he is not ready to produce the White Paper, he needs at least to give us the assurance that, when he does produce it, it will clearly say how the measures in the Bill are going to fit in.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire raised some points with which I had some sympathy. One is the exclusion from the Bill of personal care costs if people go into residential accommodation. If we are going to pay people's personal care costs if they have the most serious needs, I do not see why we would want to exclude meeting those costs in residential care. We should not go down the route of paying people's board and lodgings, as I believe that we all have a fundamental duty to contribute to our board and lodgings, irrespective of the level of our care needs, but we should eventually meet the element of residential care costs to do with personal care. I realise that that is excluded from the Bill, but when we produce the White Paper and move on to the next stage of reform, I encourage the Minister to indicate how that need is going to be met.

Carers also need to be taken into consideration. As I said in an intervention, under the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Act 2003, anyone making an assessment of someone's care needs also has to carry out a carer's assessment. It seems to me that if somebody is receiving personal care in their home and part of that care is coming from a voluntary carer, and if as part of the care plan that the Secretary of State talked about, the need for that carer to have some respite from time to time is identified, I would hope that we could include the cost of that respite within the ambit of the Bill.

The issue of benefits is certainly going to be raised. I have spoken to the Minister and to the Secretary of State about my concerns. Frankly, I would deal with that by allowing people to continue to receive attendance allowance, and not reform it. I have previously described attendance allowance as the ultimate direct payment, since it is not means-tested and provides cash that can be spent however the person wants to meet their care needs, as long as they go over a particular care threshold. Because of that, it is very valuable. For people who have saved and have some income, as a result of which they are excluded from pension credit, it can be a godsend if a non-means-tested benefit is available to them.

Having said that, I understand the Government's position that people cannot receive money twice, so if they are having all their care needs met, they cannot also expect to have attendance allowance on top of it. What we could do, of course, is continue to give people attendance allowance, but top it up to the level needed to meet their care assessments. In that way, we could maintain attendance allowance and meet the full cost of people's personal care, which is the aim of the Bill.

Mrs. Lait: I just want to put to the hon. Gentleman the thought that the benefit of attendance allowance is that it can be spent on what would not necessarily be regarded as part of a care package, but would immeasurably contribute towards somebody's well-being. For instance, if a keen gardener became unable to continue gardening, they could pay for a gardener and enhance their own satisfaction at seeing the lawn cut, which might keep them psychologically on an even keel.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is why I call attendance allowance the ultimate direct payment: it is cash to meet people's care needs however they want to meet them—and they could meet them through telecare; they could meet them through providing money for a carer; they could even use it to save up to provide respite care and pay it to a voluntary carer or a family member. As I say, it is theirs to do with as they like; for that reason, it is an incredibly powerful benefit.

I take slight issue with how the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire put it. If the Government chose to pass the value of the attendance allowance to the local council to meet someone's care needs, other legislation that we have at the moment means that someone can simply ask their local council to have their care needs met by a direct payment, rather than with direct care. In other words, they would get the cash back by another means if they wanted to go through that route. My argument is: why go through that route? Why not just leave the attendance allowance in place, with all its benefits, and top it up to the level of free personal care? I hope that the Government will ultimately come to that conclusion.

In terms of how the money is to be provided to people to meet their care needs, I hope the norm will be that it should be provided in terms of a direct payment that they can spend how they want to meet their care needs the way that they want, which raises the question, of course, of how it will be assessed—whether it will be assessed by the normal processes councils go through at the moment when costing someone's care plan, or whether it will be some sort of flat-rate payment. Although a flat-rate payment might be simple, I would certainly not want to choose that particular route.

The Government could have met their objectives in several ways, I guess. They could have had a much more complex Bill, which would clearly not have been passed before the general election, so it would not have given people in the most urgent categories of need the care that they need in the time scale that we are talking about. They could have done it as they have done by essentially putting the onus on local authorities to decide the care package. There was a third choice, which I do not know whether the Minister considered. That was to alter the criteria for NHS continuing care—bringing those criteria down to include the category of people with the most serious needs, so that the funds would effectively have come through the national health service.

The Minister has chosen the route that he has chosen for good or ill, but I would like to suggest one way of achieving flexibility in the arrangements and perhaps even a better outcome for people. At the moment, local councils and local national health services can voluntarily choose to set up a care trust to manage the care of older people, in which case both parties put money together, which can be spent as the care trust decides. That gets over the problem that there are certain legal limitations on what the NHS can spend money on. Equally, there are certain legal limitations on what local councils can spend money on, but those limitations do not exist for a care trust. If everyone has put the money in together, it can be spent in the best way possible for the people concerned.

At the moment, that is a voluntary arrangement for older people; it is not a voluntary arrangement for children, as we have reached a position where we insist on children's trusts being created to manage the funds from all the various agencies on behalf of children. I have never quite understood why we have not gone the next step and insisted on the creation of care trusts throughout England, which would also help to leverage in some extra money, I suspect, from the national health service, as well as from local government. It would give us considerable benefits in implementing this type of care plan.

Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that some councils would be better placed than others to find the money through their own provisions, so there is a possibility that these measures as presented by the Government could lead to a postcode lottery?

Dr. Ladyman: I certainly think that there is a risk. One of the risks could be reduced, depending on how the Government decide to distribute the money that is going to be made available. I think that it was the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) who asked whether the money was going to be distributed through the normal local government formula or on the basis of need. If the Government were to choose the number of older people in a particular local authority area as a good proxy for the level of need in that area and distribute the money on that basis, I suspect that they might find that there were far fewer problems. That having been said, we all know that eligibility criteria are different in different local authority areas and charging regimes are different in different local authority areas.

The only local government funding that is not ring-fenced is funding for adult social services. That used to apply to all forms of social services funding, but the Children Act 2004 effectively took the children's money away and put it into a ring-fenced fund. A local authority can only make up its own mind how much of its money to spend when that money is for adult social care, which is why many authorities choose to spend it in different ways.

Let me give a particularly bad example. When my local authority, Kent county council, decided that it needed to find several hundred thousand pounds to fund its own propaganda television channel, it increased charges for older people's care. It can raid the fund and get away with it because it is a Conservative council, and because the fund is not ring-fenced. Perhaps we should consider reforming that arrangement as part of our overall reform of adult social care.

Having said all that, I should add that the Government have made it clear that the Bill represents only a first step towards the reform that we all seek—the first small part of the journey towards the creation of a National Care Service. Many questions remain to be answered, and we need to understand much more about the way in which the Bill will work once it has been implemented. However, to the extent that it delivers some urgent care for a desperately unhappy group of our constituents at this moment, and allows them to gain some relief while we deal with all these tortuous processes—

Mr. Ellwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Ladyman: I am about to end my speech, but I will give way briefly.

Mr. Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way just as he is beginning his final crescendo. He says that the Bill is a "first step", thus suggesting that there are other steps to follow. Given the approaching election, and given that the first step was, in fact, taken back in 1997, when does he expect the next step to be presented to the Chamber?

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is trying to trivialise a serious issue. He may wish to visit the House of Commons Library and conduct some research on the steps that the Government have already taken in reforming social care. In particular, I suggest that he read a seminal document on the subject: "Independence, Well-being and Choice", a Green Paper on the reform of adult social care. Modesty forbids me to tell the House which Minister was responsible for it, but it sets out exactly the action that we need to take in order to reform what the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire identified as the key issue: the quality and level of provision of social care. How are we to make the whole process more affordable? It started with that Green Paper. The process that the Government have gone through, the consultation, the Green Paper and the "Big Care Debate", allow us to create a structure—*[Interruption.]*—in which perhaps—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) must bear in mind the rules governing debate in the House.

Dr. Ladyman: That process allows us perhaps to create a framework within which we can proceed to at least a partial consensus. Whatever we decide to do will have to last through Government after Government. Even if we assume that at some time in the far distant future the Conservative party will win a general election, the consensus will have to survive.

The Government initiated that first stage. I expect further reform to be highlighted in the White Paper that I hope we will see in the new year. I want to see a Labour Government make reform of the funding of social care and implementation of the White Paper their highest priority immediately after we win the general election in the next few months.

6.54 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). What he said towards the end of his

[Norman Lamb]

speech was absolutely right: the reform has to last. What worries many of us, however, is that the Bill may not be moving us in the right direction.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of legitimate and serious concerns about aspects of the Bill, and made a number of other good points. I agree with him about the value of care trusts and bringing together health and social care organisations. There have been some exciting developments, particularly in places such as Torbay where the integration of services appears to be improving as a result of the pooling of resources.

It is good that, at long last, we are discussing this most urgent of priorities. The Secretary of State made the fair point that much had happened over the past 12 or 13 years, and it is true that in some respects the position has improved. The right actions have been taken in respect of the personalisation agenda, for instance. Useful ideas have been developed through a partnership between central Government and local authorities.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman has referred to significant developments over the past 12 or 13 years. Does he agree that the most significant of all was the report of the royal commission on long-term care, which has been universally ignored?

Norman Lamb: I was about to add that although some good things have happened, since the commission reported there has been inertia, and deterioration and decay of the system have affected many people. If we are honest, we will admit that we all know that many elderly people are not receiving sufficient care or—as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) pointed out—care of sufficient quality.

Over the past 12 or 13 years, we have seen an escalation in fees and charges and a tightening of the criteria. Far fewer people now access care from local authorities. All that is evidence of a deterioration of the system and a growing crisis for many vulnerable people. That is why our priority is to address the problem in a way that will last: to produce reform that is supported by a consensus, and is sustainable.

The reason why the Liberal Democrats have moved away from the position of the royal commission—we will be quite up-front about this—is connected with that question of sustainability, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for South Thanet. Given demographic change and the ageing population, the cost of genuinely free personal care for all would be enormous. We should also bear in mind the care needs of not just elderly people but younger adults. More people with substantial care needs are surviving, and the total cost of that is huge. Our conclusion is that there should be a partnership between state and individuals, rather than the state's bearing the whole burden.

Kelvin Hopkins: The members of the royal commission subsequently made estimates of cost which were, at the time, the equivalent of 1 per cent. above the standard rate now, and 1.5 per cent. above the standard rate by 2050. The cost may even be double that. I have asked many people whether they would prefer the fear of not being cared for in their old age or a significant increase in tax to ensure that everyone is cared for, which is the basis of the national health service.

Norman Lamb: I respect the hon. Gentleman's position. The increase would be significantly more than that at first. There is a perverse effect that one ought to consider. At a time when public finances are very tight—this is something that the Wanless commission specifically identified—a significant amount of public money is being given to some very wealthy people who could choose to fund at least part of their care themselves. I have severe doubts about whether we would be using public money to the best advantage by giving substantial sums to the very wealthy, which would be the effect of the policy that the hon. Gentleman advocates.

We will not divide the House on the Bill; we will support it at this stage to facilitate debate. We will vote with the Conservatives on the programme motion, because it is important that the Bill is fully debated and that there are no time constraints. I shall deal with the origins of the Bill first, and then its impact and where we go from here.

The Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, made the point that the Bill came out of the blue in the Prime Minister's speech to the Labour party conference. It is stretching language to the extreme to describe it as a bridge to a comprehensive reform of the care system. If it genuinely were a bridge, the Green Paper, which took many months to produce, would have referred to a first bridge to a new system, yet it was entirely silent on this unexpected proposal. The Green Paper was long overdue, but it was deliberative and consultative—it went through the process of consulting all interested parties—and, ultimately, it was quite well received across the health spectrum, and particularly by groups representing those with greatest need. Then the Bill came completely out of the blue.

In politics, the most devastating criticism tends to come from people on one's own side, and that is especially so when they have expertise in the subject under discussion. That is true of the comments of Lord Warner and Lord Lipsey on this Bill. Lord Warner said of the proposals:

"There has been no proper impact assessment, and no data to show how this would work."

Lord Lipsey was, of course, a member of the royal commission to which the Secretary of State referred. He said:

"I think it is a bad policy but also a very bad way to do policy just to find a nice highlight for your Labour Party conference speech."

That is pretty devastating criticism. He also said that it was "a bit of gimmick", and that he hopes that the Prime Minister

"will reflect on whether this proposal is in the national interest or merely designed to achieve party political interests."

Dr. Ladyman: I cannot stop myself pointing out to the hon. Gentleman that Lord Lipsey was the member of the royal commission who wrote the dissenting report that the Government adopted, and that from the date it was produced until now the Liberal Democrats have been telling us that he did not know what he was talking about.

Norman Lamb: Lord Lipsey is a Labour peer who was chosen to sit on that commission and who until now has taken a position that is entirely consistent with the Labour Government's. The Labour Government have now chosen to move away from his position.

[Interruption.] As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) says, that makes this measure even more devastating.

Kelvin Hopkins: Was Lord Lipsey not put on that royal commission at a late stage by Downing street, in order to create a minority report and thereby to prevent the commission's findings from being unanimous, and that he is now worrying that the Government will backslide on his minority report?

Norman Lamb: I have no idea, but I would not be surprised, given the way this Government operate. One is left with the sense that this is an utterly cynical move by the Government.

Not only people such as Lord Warner and Lord Lipsey have criticised the Bill. Niall Dickson, the highly respected chief executive of the King's Fund, who is leaving that organisation after several years of service, has said that these latest proposals

"have been hastily put together and appear to cut across the options set out in the government's own Green Paper."

He did not see them as a bridge to the future, either, adding that:

"After all, the government has only just finished consulting us on the very different proposals set out in that document."

He went on to talk about the "danger of perverse incentives", which is another point that the hon. Member for South Thanet rightly raised.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the economic modelling that lay behind the Green Paper might not have been made available, in part because it had to be re-scrambled and meshed with the unbridgeable announcement made at the Labour party conference?

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and I suspect that his assumption may well be correct. Ultimately, this is law-making of the worst possible kind; it is from the "back of the fag packet" school of legislating. It is all about electioneering, but it is not about serious reform, which is what we all ought to be engaged in.

Christopher Fraser: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the delivery of these health care services in rural constituencies such as ours, where the dynamics are quite different from those of inner-city areas, has not been addressed at all in this Bill?

Norman Lamb: That has neither been addressed in the Bill, nor been addressed for a very long time. The costs of delivering care in rural areas are often much higher and, to mention just one difficulty, it is often very difficult to recruit care workers, so the hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

This whole process raises some serious questions about who is ultimately responsible for the proposal. Given that there was nothing about it in the Green Paper, did it emanate from the Department of Health or from No. 10 Downing street? How long had the team at the Department of Health been working on the proposal prior to that conference speech? Does the Minister wish to intervene, because I would be very interested to learn when that information was made known to the team working on the Green Paper? When were they informed?

I turn to the impact of the proposal. I completely support the Bill's measures on reablement. It makes absolute sense for much more to be done to prevent ill health in the first place, and to ensure that resources are put into maintaining people better in their own homes, but are the measures consistent with the Green Paper objectives? The Green Paper stresses the need to make the

"best use of public money to provide a joined-up, consistent and fair care and support system".

I strongly endorse that objective. It goes on to say:

"We can use the taxpayers' money that is already in the system to provide everyone"—

not just one group of people—

"with some care. We believe that that should be the starting point".

That is interesting, because that appears to be a very different starting point as a bridge to a reformed system. The Green Paper goes on to say that

"any system must be a partnership between the state and individuals".

The Green Paper also rules out funding the new system from taxation as too heavy a burden on people of working age. I appreciate that the intention is not to provide care for all, but for the Bill to go in that direction appears to be completely contrary to the intentions of the Green Paper. Therefore, the Bill fails on all these tests: it is not joined up; it is not consistent with the Green Paper; it helps one group, but not all; it is not a partnership approach; and it is funded by general taxation, contrary to the intentions of the Green Paper.

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Member for South Thanet described the people who would be helped as a very small subsection of the population. That is a useful phrase, as it is not consistent with how the Bill is being presented.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Member for South Thanet hit the nail on the head, because the number of people who will benefit is much lower than the headline number of 400,000 of which the Government have sought to convince the public.

I want to deal with the potential perverse effects of the Bill. It is a partial solution, and the risk of implementing a partial solution was highlighted by Niall Dickson. Andrew Harrop of Age Concern and Help the Aged also specifically highlighted the risk that the Bill will push councils into getting people into care homes, thereby avoiding the cost of caring for people at home. According to Andrew Harrop, there is the alternative risk that councils will argue that someone's need is not critical—that as a way of avoiding responsibility they will find that people fall below the level.

There is also a risk that the Bill will take money away from some vulnerable groups in order to give it to a particular group of vulnerable people and that we will end up with a costly and demeaning process of disputes about whether someone's care needs are "critical". We are likely to see a bureaucratic and time-consuming process of social workers carrying out assessments to determine whether someone's needs are "substantial" or "critical".

Kelvin Hopkins: Could all this not be overcome by providing long-term care, either at home or in care homes, free of charge—just like the national health service? All the cost and the problem would thus disappear. We are talking about money and not about care at the moment.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman is right in one sense, because he is advocating a comprehensive system that applies to everybody; when we start applying a process to one group of people, we create perverse effects and bureaucracy in determining whether somebody falls into or outside a category. He rightly identifies the need for a comprehensive solution.

The hon. Member for South Thanet also accurately identified the risk of a disincentive for people to take out insurance. It is almost inevitable that insurance will be part of the overall solution that we seek to achieve—if we can build a consensus. The Bill inevitably amounts to a disincentive for people to take out insurance to protect against potential need. Who benefits from the measure? Remarkably, paragraph 5.21 of the impact assessment identifies the group that will benefit most as the "wealthiest older people". It is bizarre in the extreme and it is extraordinary that the Government have chosen a partial solution—rather than a comprehensive one—that, according to their own impact assessment, benefits most the wealthiest older people.

There is also uncertainty about the cost and the number of people who will benefit. The impact assessment is riddled with uncertainty about the cost, and the Local Government Association has highlighted the point. First, the impact of take-up by people who are funding their own care is unknown; we do not know how many of the people who are currently funding their own care would come into the system. All we have is an estimate—that is all it can be. The Government say that they are confident that the figures are accurate, but they have no basis for that confidence. The impact of behaviour change with regard to residential care is unknown. The Conservative spokesman highlighted that the figures in the impact assessment are inconsistent with each other on that point. We do not know how many people will move from residential care to being cared for at home to take advantage of the offer of free care.

The data on the number of those who are classified as "critical" and the relative distribution of their needs and disabilities are not collected centrally, so again we have no idea how many people we are talking about. We also do not know how many people are already receiving reablement. We do not know the proportion of those who after receiving reablement would not require care. Thus, the central assumption on cost and numbers in the impact assessment is uncertain. If the Government are wrong in their assessment of the total cost, what would be the consequences? We know from the consultation paper on the regulations that there is a fixed total sum available, so who would lose out if the figures were wrong? Will the criteria be tightened even more—beyond the calculation of "critical" need? Something has to give and the Government have not said what that would be.

The LGA also raises serious concern about the potential for local government to fund its £250 million a year contribution. It is already making substantial efficiency savings, regardless of the £250 million that would be required. We know that over the past decade social care has been the poor relation of the health service in funding increases. At each spending round the health service receives a substantially greater real-terms increase than social care, and now the Government expect social care to come up with £250 million of efficiency savings to contribute to the cost of this measure. We have no way of knowing whether the system is capable of delivering that sort of sum. There is a real risk that it will amount to robbing Peter to pay Paul, taking care away from one vulnerable person to provide it to another whose financial resources may mean that they are actually better able to pay. The Secretary of State has today conceded that the total number of people who will benefit is 110,000—not the 400,000 that has been talked about. As the hon. Member for South Thanet said, the Bill benefits a very small subset of people.

On specific issues relating to the Bill, I would be grateful if in winding up the Minister would deal with concerns that some groups have about the meaning of "critical". Will meeting just one of the critical areas, as defined, be enough to allow someone to qualify? What is the meaning of the "significant help" needed for the four daily activities? There is surely a need for greater clarity on that. Sense, the organisation representing deafblind people, refers to the fact that personal care, as defined in the Bill,

"excludes the type of communicator guide support which is so vital to deafblind people."

That group is one of the most at risk of having to go into residential care, but it is excluded from help—surely that cannot be justified.

Where do we go from here? There are serious concerns about the perverse impact that this unsatisfactory measure could have. The most pressing priority is to put in place a comprehensive, sustainable system—one that will last, as has been said—that will guarantee care for those who need it most, funded in a way that is fair and recognising the reality of the public finances. There is an urgent need to build consensus. Any Government coming to power next year, of whichever party or parties, have a massive challenge ahead of them in resolving this issue—such a resolution is overdue. Given the state of public finances, there is a real risk that this issue will be pushed, yet again, into the long grass. Surely we should all commit now to a process to secure a consensus. It is in the interests of any incoming Government that a process is already in place to achieve that. We should establish now—we should not wait until the next Parliament—a cross-party commission with a defined remit of achieving consensus in a tight time scale. Let us just imagine how the public would react if they saw the three main parties agreeing to come together to recognise that this challenge must be faced and must be met without further delay. That is necessary and it is of acute importance, so I urge all sides to agree to a process that secures that consensus on a sustainable system that will last into the future.

7.19 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who spoke of things being kicked into the long grass—I suspect that a fair bit of that is occurring on the Opposition Benches to say the least. It is disingenuous for the Opposition to say that they do not intend to vote

against the Bill in principle and then to go about trying to take it apart piece by piece and rubbishing it before it can get a head start.

I thoroughly support the Bill. Of course there are difficulties and issues to clear up, but at the heart of it we need to remember that it is desperately wanted and desperately needed by many people who live in fear of their future. This House has a responsibility to respond to those concerns, and not only to consider the measures carefully, but to ensure that they are put in place.

I firmly believe that the Bill is an excellent stepping stone to the much greater piece of work that is going on. Frankly, I would have gone straight for the National Care Service and forgotten about the consultation. It feels like motherhood and apple pie to me—like the early days of the NHS—to go ahead and set something up in that spirit. We should be considering social care in the same terms as the NHS. Of course, many people in the Chamber have had the opportunity to spend a lot of time examining the Bill in detail—including how we came to the position that we are now in—but I firmly believe that we need to get back to the principle of worrying about those who, without question, will benefit from it.

With those people in mind, I want to give a few reasons why we need to buckle down and get the Bill into place. It is not only desirable, but much needed. I was a member of the nursing profession for many years before I was elected to the House of Commons and was deeply aware of those people who, without support and help at home, found themselves in hospital or in social care. There is nothing worse for an acute nurse to know than that somebody for whom they are caring could, with proper support, have been kept at home and had the comfort of knowing that they would be looked after in their own home. For the people for whom this Bill will be most helpful—those with the dementia range of conditions—entering hospital for rehabilitative care is often incredibly damaging. It is confusing and upsetting, families become upset and it is often obvious at that point that it could have been avoided. For that reason alone, and for the many patients whose cases I have in my head who could have avoided admission, I support the Bill.

I was very interested to hear the Opposition suggest that carers would step away from helping their relatives if such a Bill were passed. Frankly, I found that insulting to carers. Anybody who undertakes that work knows very well that they want to work in partnership with the care services. They want to have time to be on their own and to be able to share their experiences with friends and families, without the constant burden of caring for their loved one. This Bill will help many hundreds of people to live their lives as carers in much more certainty.

Kelvin Hopkins: I think my hon. Friend has answered my point, in a sense, but does she not agree that hundreds of thousands of carers have enormous pressures on them because of elderly relatives who need much more care than they can possibly give and that giving more assistance to them is precisely what we should be doing?

Laura Moffatt: Indeed. I thoroughly concur with those views. That would improve the quality of life not only of the person in receipt of care but of the carers.

Many authorities are beginning this work already and that is why I do not have the depressed view that we cannot tackle the problem at this point. A year ago, the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), came to launch our well-being programme in Crawley. The local authority has come together with NHS West Sussex to provide excellent care at home—not only education on eating and smoking, but a full service that includes advice on preventing trips at home. I can imagine how much better it will be when we have a more comprehensive home care service for those people.

This Bill is utterly doable. It is disingenuous to say, "We thoroughly agree with it, but we will now produce 101 reasons why we do not believe that we can move forward." Those who will benefit from the Bill will listen carefully to those words—I shall ensure that they hear them. I hope that with due consideration of the Bill, in a reasonable and timely way, which of course we can achieve with one clause, we will move forward and get it in place. We can then move on to a National Care Service, which will be welcomed wholeheartedly in this country.

7.25 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt). I think that the point she was making—I hope that I am correct—was that more people need access to top-quality services to ensure that they stay in their own homes for as long as possible. I do not think that there is any argument in the Chamber about that statement. The question is how we can best get there.

I am very conscious of the question of whether the Bill is needed at all, given that the best evidence that the Secretary of State could give us concerned the work that is being done on the Isle of Wight. The hon. Lady mentioned what is happening in Crawley, and I am sure that we can all cite cases from our social services departments in which, over the years, they have become more involved in intensive rehabilitation. That shows that these services are already emerging. I often wonder why we need to pass legislation so that people can continue to provide best practice. If it is best practice, and if it is saving local authorities substantial sums of money, it is in their best interests to do it. They do not need the legislative burden that is being imposed.

Although we agree that there should be better services for personal care delivery, the Bill is next to redundant. We should be moving much more towards deciding—as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Health pointed out and as the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) implied, too—that there are a range of different ways in which to finance the achievement of better personal care. We would be better off, frankly, doing it comprehensively rather than piecemeal. The Bill has been referred to as a bridge and as a stepping stone, but I suspect that, in the long run, it will go on the statute book and will be ignored, not implemented or will have to be comprehensively reworked, should another care Bill be proposed.

In one sense, I welcome the debate that we are having on such a short Bill—it is, fundamentally, one clause long. Most of the Opposition's contributions have certainly questioned how effective it will be. I represent a constituency

[Mrs. Jacqui Lait]

in the London borough of Bromley, which is one of the wealthiest boroughs in London. It has, without doubt, the highest proportion of retired people of all the London boroughs. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) said that the Bill will mainly benefit wealthy people, and that is highly likely to happen in my borough. Apart from three main areas where we have genuine deprivation, the rest of the borough is relatively wealthy. People in the borough will have been meeting their needs using their own resources. The flaw of the Bill is, as he pointed out, that people who have been doing that, who might be in great need—I am not saying that they are not, and I sympathise entirely with their need to get proper care—have not been cared for in the public sector, and that the costs of care will therefore run completely out of control.

I am also concerned that East Sussex—here I declare an interest, because my husband is the leader of East Sussex county council—has a high proportion of retired people. Those people are not, by any means, the wealthy retired. If whatever money that is forthcoming from the Government—from saving on ad campaigns and research money—is distributed according to the local government formula, that will penalise people in counties such as East Sussex that are already suffering because of the perverse nature of the formula. I suspect that the hon. Member for South Thanet could say the same about his part of Thanet, although it is in a very wealthy county. If the money is to be distributed on the basis of the needs of the population, I foresee some squawks from the friends in the north, because it is much more likely that money will go to areas in the south with high numbers of retired people, which are not necessarily Labour controlled—not that much of local government is these days. We foresee perversity emerging in a variety of ways in relation to this one-clause Bill.

I have been advised by a member of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, who is such a director, that the costings have not been shared with the social services department or with a wider audience and that the estimates of need have not been shared. Estimates are therefore a wild approximation of what the demand, and hence the cost, will be. The Government could find themselves in a position that they do not want to be in of being unable to fund the programme that they have put in place.

Another area that the Government probably have not worked through properly—my hon. Friend picked up on this point—is the sheer scale of need in relation to the professionals required to deliver the rehabilitation services that everyone is talking about. I use the word "rehabilitation" quite deliberately, as I think that "reablement" is another ghastly politically correct word and that we would be better off using a familiar one.

There are already insufficient occupational therapists. Anyone who needs, or knows someone who needs, an occupational therapist knows how long people have to wait for one. Anyone who needs physiotherapy knows how long it takes to get a physiotherapy appointment unless they have an immediate medical requirement. We can forget about psychologists, given how long it takes to see one, particularly following the introduction of talking therapies. It will take years to get hold of the professional skills that will be required to deliver the rehabilitation services that we would all like, because we have to recruit professionals from schools, get them through their training and then through what are, in effect, apprenticeships. It is almost an unfair promise to say that comprehensive services will be delivered to elderly people who are in great need, because we will not be able to get those services to such people as they need them.

Dr. Ladyman: I am enjoying the hon. Lady's contribution, and I agree that there is a serious issue with providing those different professionals, but does she agree that we will have to go through that process anyway, irrespective of what reforms we agree in relation to the model for funding social care? We will have to make those changes anyway, so those points are irrelevant to the Bill.

Mrs. Lait: I wish that they were irrelevant. The purpose of the Bill, if I have read the Government right, is to be able to say during the election campaign, "We will deliver to you, from October 2010, these sophisticated services," but those sophisticated services will not exist in the volume that will be required. That is the unfairness implicit in that promise.

Bed blocking will still be an issue, and the hon. Gentleman has taken me around in a circle back to where I needed to be. Many years ago, we spent endless hours in the Chamber talking about bed blocking. We were talking about it then because assessment processes were not in place. They are now better, and although I would not say that bed blocking is gone, we are not talking about it to the same extent. Also, we now realise that once an elderly person, or someone who is not very mobile, has been in a bed for 48 hours, they will need intensive rehabilitation to get them back into their home. Some of those services are available and are better than they were, but provision certainly is not as comprehensive as the Bill promises. It has, however, shown the need for expansion in the availability of those skills, and we have not addressed that problem.

Dr. Ladyman: The Bill amends the very Act that sorted out bed blocking. It takes the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Act 2003 and simply says that we are going to make services do what the Act requires of them for longer than the current six weeks. I agree that the situation is not what the hon. Lady wants it to be and that we need those extra professionals, but the key thing that the Bill does is to say to people who are currently funding their own services that we will fund such services for them in future. It will take a long time to deal with her logistical concerns, but they are not relevant to the Bill.

Mrs. Lait: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting in a mention of the 2003 Act, which he took through Parliament, and I congratulate him on the Act. Let us not get into a long debate about how bed blocking was cured. The point remains that the Bill explicitly promises that from October 2010—only 10 months from now—people's rehabilitation care will be provided for an indeterminate length of time, and the relevant services to do that do not exist. That is the unfairness of the Bill.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: My hon. Friend makes her points extremely powerfully. It seems to me that she is worried about promises being made on this vital service,

on which so many people depend, not least given the experience in Scotland, where the capacity to deliver against a promise simply was not available. Therefore, the promise could only be broken because there was not the capacity in the first place. Is that the case?

Mrs. Lait: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. My mother benefited from that system when it first came in. Sadly, just after she died, the budgets had to be cut back. I have seen that situation on a practical level. We face a general election in six months, and this is yet another Bill that should be called a "shore up the Labour party vote" Bill. That is what is so distressing about this short Bill.

I want to hop briefly on to another of my current hobby horses—the programme motion, which I am glad we are voting against tonight. Yet again, we have a demonstration of how the Government have inadvertently ceded to the House of Lords legislative control over the Queen's Speech. It is no longer this Chamber that makes final decisions on legislation, but the House of Lords. I do not find that acceptable. I was not elected to this place to give my job to the House of Lords and I very much hope that in a few months' time when my Government come in they will reverse the process of ceding control to the House of Lords.

7.40 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): We all know why the current Government, and indeed former Governments, have not moved rapidly on personal care—it is horrendously expensive. If we look for a moment at the economic situation, we see that the country is accumulating a large debt. If we look at the pension situation, we see that people are living longer than ever and if we look at the care situation, we see that because people are living longer and are frail, there is potentially a large bill for the Government, local authorities and individuals.

There is no easy answer. Earlier in the debate, one or two Members suggested that we should just lump the costs on to taxation and that might do the job, but of course the British tax system tends to hit people at a lower and poorer level than is sensible. All the surveys on poverty show that young families with children fall into the bottom poverty quartiles—at least for a period, when one parent cannot work.

It would have been far better had the Green Paper in July been allowed to take its course and if we had accepted representations from a range of people and taken a decision about where we wanted to go in the future. The Government could have introduced a degree of certainty in the debate, so that both the private and voluntary sector and local authorities could plan and work to it. If we want any kind of insurance scheme to be a success, we have to be sure that the boundaries are clearly drawn—what the state will do and what individuals are expected to do.

I have the privilege of representing a constituency that is probably in the top 35 in terms of older electors. It is not unusual for an elderly couple to come to see me at my surgery about their parents who are even frailer. The problem is that the system relies greatly on carers, some of whom are very elderly and unable to lift their loved ones or look after them. It is a good thing that families care for the elderly, and it needs to be encouraged. One of the things we need to look at as a state is whether if we gave individuals personal budgets, they could use that money to pay their relatives to look after them. From my understanding of the situation in Holland and one or two other states, I think that would be a good thing.

Because of the sudden rush of blood to the Government's head, we have a partial change that will have perverse incentives on the rest of the system. We have not managed to ascertain tonight quite what the demand will be—until the service is implemented we shall not know—and as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) said, we do not know whether there will be full back-up. A big problem in Poole is that if somebody wants to stay in their own home, they need adaptions, which sometimes need planning permission, but the budget seems to be limited so it takes some while to get the adaptions that people need. That is one of the factors that will cause a problem.

I am a little concerned about the funding, which seems to be calculated on the back of an envelope. In all my time in both local and national Government, there has been something called the magic pot, which is usually somebody else's efficiency savings projected over a period of years. If somebody else works a bit more efficiently, we can fund a particular service in the full knowledge that if local government cannot provide it efficiently, it will have to put up council tax.

I spent longer in local government than I have as a Member of Parliament, and in my humble opinion local authorities are, on the whole, quite efficient at delivering services. They are certainly better at controlling money. They are better at dealing with a limited amount and getting what the Government want from it. It may not be everything the Government want, but local authorities manage to deliver an awful lot.

I am not sure that the measure is being properly funded. The council element is questionable, as are one or two other elements, so the problem is that we shall come back to the pinch point of eligibility. At the end of the day, if councils do not have enough money, they will use eligibility criteria that fit the funds they have. Local authorities have been capped and are expected to make savings. On top of that they are now expected to deliver a major reform, which will require a great deal of investment—for example, in physiotherapists and adaptions to homes. It will also require funding, and ultimately if the funding is not there, the legislation cannot be carried out.

Another perverse incentive is that, to some extent, the measure would discriminate against people going into care homes, which may be the best thing for some people to do. Families may try to keep someone in their own home when it is inappropriate because they do not want to burn up the value of the house by moving that person into a care home.

We need to think carefully about the measure. I am glad that my hon. Friends have said that they intend, if given sufficient time, to scrutinise the Bill fully to ensure that we have answers to some of the major questions that have been raised.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) made a very good point; there is a lot to be said for all-party consensus. Whatever is agreed needs to be agreed for between five and 20 years. We do not need

[Mr. Robert Syms]

somebody coming in with their new version and reinventing the wheel. We need long-term arrangements, so it is a pity that the Government rushed off in their own direction and did not listen to the opinions of the consultees, who initially thought they were genuinely being asked and were a little upset that the Government had already made up their mind—certainly on one aspect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham made an important point about the distribution of the money on the basis of grant. Many of us have a heavy weighting of elderly, but also low grant levels, which will create a difficulty in delivering services. If the money is distributed on the basis of an older population, it would be welcome but there will clearly be losers, who might have an opinion. There are some very wealthy areas of Poole, but although many of my constituents have an asset in the form of a home that is worth a lot, their income is low—not least because people's pension arrangements have not been quite what they expected, for various reasons.

Keeping people in their own home if they have no income or savings will be at a high cost, even if we can find enough people to run around and look after them. At present, many members of the Polish community do a great job looking after the elderly in most of the care homes in my constituency, but there will be a real problem finding people with adequate training to provide those services. In the past, as we all know, because of staff turnover and the terms and conditions both for those who work in care homes and for those who deliver care to individuals in their own home, the commitment to training has not been all it should be. If we are serious about providing a care package for people who remain in their own home, we have to increase the pay, rewards and training for those who look after the elderly, so that they receive the best care and so that caring is seen as a proper career and people do not go into it because they cannot do, or are not skilled enough to do, anything else.

The Bill is interesting and I am glad that my hon. Friends will scrutinise it fully. We have a major problem, however. This is yet another initiative that, however worthy, needs to be funded against the background of a country that is spending rather too much. Unless we get a grip on that, there will be problems in the long term not only for our fellow citizens but for the children and grandchildren of some of the people we have been talking about in the debate.

7.49 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): If the Bill were an emergency measure—an emergency response to a problem—it would have happened sooner. After all, the circumstances with which it deals are well established and well known. If, on the other hand, it was not an emergency measure, it should have been part of a bigger Bill, a greater plan, as was envisaged in what the Government said earlier this year, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) from the Front Bench and by others.

So one is left in a quandary about what the Bill is for. There are those in the Chamber who would take a cynical view. I alluded earlier to that view, my hon. Friend was kind enough to say, with irony. Some would say that it was purely a political calculation, but I like to think better of the Government than that. I cannot believe that Government Members would behave in such a low and dishonourable way. It would be certainly hard to imagine them doing so.

I want to spend some time considering the Bill on its merits, however slim they might be. My hon. Friend identified two prevailing themes that should have underpinned the legislation. He spoke of quality. If we were to break that down further in respect of care, we would talk about where care was provided, by whom, at what point and in what form. One might have hoped for a little more clarity about any or all of those aspects of care in the opening speech from the Secretary of State, but it was short on such details, as is the very small Bill itself. We are not left in any greater certainty about what is to be provided, where, when or to whom; or at least not exactly to whom, for although the explanatory notes make an estimate of the number of people affected, as my hon. Friend highlighted, this calculation is imperfect.

From even a preliminary glance at the Bill, it seems to me that it is likely to have two profound effects. One is a displacement effect on what is already being done, and the second is a catalyst effect on what might happen. Let us deal with them in turn. The displacement effect could have severe repercussions, certainly for local authorities, which are to provide much of the service on an unfunded basis. From where will they draw the money and what other services will suffer as a result of this displacement?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. The hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) should not be reading a newspaper in the Chamber.

Mr. Hayes: It is difficult for me to comprehend that anyone would want to read a newspaper during this immensely penetrating and exciting oration, but self-delusion is a feature of politics, I suppose.

The displacement effect of the Bill is likely to be serious. The House deserves a better explanation of what the Government have modelled in those terms. We heard earlier, rather alarmingly, that the consultation on the proposed legislation has been, at best, slight. None the less, it is inconceivable that the Department will not have modelled some of the effects on local authorities. I hope that when the Minister sums up, we hear more about that modelling.

There is a displacement effect in other respects. Other services that are provided to people in order to deliver the quality of care to which my hon. Friend referred may be at risk, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) highlighted.

Equally limited is the estimate of the catalyst effect of the Bill. When I come to the main part of my speech, I shall speak about the home and care in considerably more detail, but in these preliminary remarks, I urge the Government to provide, perhaps in the summing up, greater clarity about what the catalyst effect might be.

It is surely inconceivable that people will not reorder their affairs to take advantage of the extra care. That is not in any sense a criticism. I guess it is what many of us might do in similar circumstances, but again, there is a

singular absence of information about that—no obvious estimate, no modelling available to the House. I entirely endorse the sentiment expressed from those on the Opposition Front Bench that these matters need to be explored in considerable detail in Committee, which is why the programme motion is disappointing, to say the least.

The only modelling that we have is in the explanatory notes, but the calculations there—the estimates of the number of people in the main beneficiary groups and the table that forms part of that—seem to be imperfect. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire mentioned the mathematical imperfections. Given the displacement that I described and the incentive effect that I mentioned, perhaps the table ought to be recalculated. I hope that a pledge might come from Ministers to examine those matters more closely in the light of the contributions of various hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Mr. Newmark: When I asked the Minister about the cost of individuals giving up their time—constituents in Braintree often tell me about the time that they give—the figure was some £80 billion. That represents what all our constituents collectively do by way of giving to family members and close friends. However, there is a sense of social contract and obligation that the Government should have in respect of our constituents who put in time—that is, non-financial benefits and non-financial support. Has my hon. Friend thought through these issues and the shortcomings of the Bill with respect to the non-financial support that the Government should give to our constituents?

Mr. Hayes: Indeed. That very good point was made not only by my hon. Friend, but also by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), who speaks with some authority on these matters. The hon. Gentleman asked the Secretary of State about the relationship with carers and the effect of the Bill on carers. In doing so, he was echoing the sentiments so strongly expressed when the Bill that the present Bill amends was introduced in the House back in 2002.

The then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), made it clear that the purpose of that legislation was to marry care with health and to take into account all the elements that constitute quality care—not merely the information provided by health authorities to those responsible for care, but some calculation of the various individuals and agencies that collectively comprise quality care. I shall have more to say about the 2003 Act, which has been mentioned several times in the debate, and about how the Bill marries with that precedent.

There is a legitimate difference between principle and purpose. That is not, as it might seem, axiomatic. The principle on which the Bill is founded—that of care in the home—is shared across the Chamber. The purpose of the Bill, however, is less clear. Its purpose in respect of delivering that principle is—I put it as kindly as I can—questionable, because although the Secretary of State claimed in its defence that it was paving legislation, when challenged repeatedly through interventions and by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen, he conceded, quite generously and certainly openly, that further legislation would be required. Indeed, he spoke of "a major reform" being necessary, but he made no attempt to suggest that this Bill was that major reform; he said merely that it anticipated the major reform that was essential to satisfy the principle and to deliver the objective that all Members share.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I am listening in awe to my hon. Friend's great speech, which is clearly schooled by the great compassion that he has for his many constituents who find themselves in difficulty. One thing of which I am sure he is conscious is how the Government did not make their case that there was a bridge between the Bill and the Green Paper process, which had legitimised so much of the debate to date. Does he therefore agree that it would be appropriate for the Government to provide time for amendments to be made to the Bill to widen its ambition and ambit, not least so that we can put it into the context for which he argues on behalf of his constituents?

Mr. Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he, as a Front-Bench spokesman on these matters, knows far more about them than I do. He is right that I am, however imperfectly, a champion for my constituents' interests, particularly my most vulnerable constituents, for the cause of the most vulnerable lies at the heart of Conservative passion; for a core tenet of Conservatism is the elevation of the people: the responsibility that the fortunate have for the less fortunate.

On my hon. Friend's intervention, it seems to me that the Government have two options: either they can do as he invites and make the Bill bigger, build on its slim elements and create the major reform that the Secretary of State acknowledged was necessary; or they might choose, as a result of this debate or further reflection, to withdraw the Bill, continue the process that they began earlier in the year, recognise that bigger legislation is the best way of proceeding with these matters and acknowledge—I suppose rather grudgingly, but it would be to their immense credit if they did—that this Bill was a gimmick and that the subject deserves more.

Dr. Ladyman *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: The subject certainly deserves the sort of considered reflection that the hon. Gentleman gives such matters.

Dr. Ladyman: Let us assume that there is a White Paper in the new year; that there is a discussion about it; that a consensus begins to emerge; that a new Government are elected, perhaps, in May; and that they come to the House with a much wider social welfare reform Bill, which would take the best part of 12 months to go through. That would mean that the wider reform of which the hon. Gentleman talks would take, with the best will in the world, approximately 18 months. Is it not reasonable for the Government to introduce this small measure, which will help some people with the most serious needs between now and the conclusion of that process 18 months hence? He seems to argue for doing nothing for those people who need help now, while we carry on debating the issue for perhaps another 18 months.

Mr. Hayes: If we were having that debate at the beginning of the life of a new Government, or at the end of the first term of a new Government, that might be a reasonable point. But, as the Government have

[Mr. Hayes]

been in power for a considerable time, it is odd that this Bill should emanate at this juncture. As I have said, I try not to be cynical about these things, but a more sceptical person than I might argue, "Better a Bill that works later than an imperfect Bill now." If the hon. Gentleman's scenario came to pass, it is not only likely that the best bits of this Bill would be included in that legislation, but that, more significantly, proper consultation with all the interest groups, local authorities and representative organisations of those most affected by the legislation could and would take place. That process would inform the Bill, which as a result would change and develop.

I see the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) in his place. I know him well because I shadowed him in another life, as it were, so I cannot believe that he does not find persuasive the argument that we really need to think again about the Bill. We need to measure its likely effects in terms put by various third parties. I shall refer to them later, because thus far it has not received an uncritical reception from the groups that I just mentioned. We need either to flesh it out, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) proposes, or to withdraw it and start again.

I say to the hon. Member for South Thanet that the people most affected want a Bill that is best, a Bill that works for them; they certainly do not want a short-term measure that has to be either amended or replaced rapidly with something quite different.

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that another consequence of the Bill taking effect and disappointing people is that it, in its production, it will inevitably raise expectations considerably among vulnerable people? If they find that those expectations are not met, will they look with favour on further discussions—cross-party or otherwise—about the future of social care?

Mr. Hayes: That is where I began my speech—by reaffirming the point about the desirability of quality. The Bill must deliver quality care. Those expectations will be for just that kind of care, and quality care often manifests in the contribution of a range of agencies and individuals bringing in all kinds of different skills: the holistic approach that one had every hope might spring from the Green Paper consultation, a White Paper and well considered legislation. One disadvantage of proceeding now is exactly the false expectation to which my hon. Friend draws our attention, and its consequences in terms not just of disappointment, but—I go further—heartache.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) said that we should support this—by his own admission—small measure in the overall architecture of care, be that domiciliary or residential care, and my hon. Friend effectively replied that we do not oppose it, but we do question it. First, we want more Committee time to question it; secondly, in response to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), we need more capacity. This is about the quality not just of the offering, but of the promise that can be delivered—if that is what is on offer—in October 2010. If that quality of promise cannot be kept, the damage done to vulnerable people will be so cruel as to be not worth thinking about.

Mr. Hayes: The shadow Secretary of State said that the issue was not just funding or organisation, but quality. My hon. Friend's intervention leads me to conclude that the problem is not only about quality, but—to go further than the shadow Secretary of State—about organisation and funding, because some the Bill's effects may be perverse. We agree with its principle, but its too limited nature may of itself be detrimental to the principle that we share.

Chesterton said:

"To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it".

The Government certainly have the right to introduce this legislation, but I am not sure that a politician of the distinguished status of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Corby would want this Bill on his record when he could have a much better Bill if he did the thing properly.

Chloe Smith (Norwich, North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hayes: I shall, but then I want to move on to the substance of my speech, because these are only my introductory remarks, after all.

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for affording me just a few moments. Does he agree with me and, I am sure, other Members—at least on the Opposition Benches—that the part of society under discussion is a particularly vulnerable one to, as it were, monkey around with, and that we face a particular demographic challenge that such hasty legislation does nothing whatever to combat?

Mr. Hayes: Yes. As long ago as 2002, when the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Bill, which this Bill amends, was introduced, the then Secretary of State pointed out exactly that. In introducing the Bill, he said:

"Ours is an ageing society. We should not fear but celebrate that. However, it poses formidable challenges for our key public services in providing better, faster care to higher standards"—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2002; Vol. 395, c. 501.]

based on the desire for older people to have independence, not dependence. That is the principle that I am describing as the one on which we all agree, supplemented by an absolute determination that such care should be of the highest quality and provided from the best sources—that we get the who, what, when and where questions right.

To that end, I will focus briefly on the principle of care at home. In doing so, I want to draw attention to the time of year at which we debate these matters. As we approach Christmas, it is appropriate to remember Charles Dickens, is it not? Chesterton wrote that

"in everybody there is a certain thing that loves babies, that fears death, that likes sunlight: that thing enjoys Dickens."

It is that part of us that also loves home and cares about the most vulnerable. Dickens himself wrote:

"Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration."

For me, the concept of home is at the heart of civilised life. This is much more than speaking about housing. To talk of housing is one thing; to talk of home lifts us on to a different emotional plane. Home stands at the bright centre of our lives; home is where lives start and end. It is where we return to at the end of each day, and where we hope to return to at the end of all our days. It is right that people should be enabled to live in their homes for as long as they possibly can and that we should provide adequate support in order for them to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire referred to quality in respect of care. For me, that is intrinsically linked to the security, certainty and familiarity associated with the home, all of which contribute to care in all kinds of ways that are supportive not only of a reasonable quality of life but a reasonably healthy life.

Ministers might claim—as indeed they have, not entirely convincingly; in fact, I do not think that they themselves are entirely convinced—that the legislation before us attempts to enable people to return home at the end of their days, or to stay at home. However, the Bill's purpose is both limited and contradictory. It contains just two clauses, and that paucity of content reveals its true purpose. It is not intended to address the substantial reasons why so many people are forced from their homes and into care, but simply to help one person to stay in one home. That person is the Prime Minister, and the home is 10 Downing street. I have to conclude, reluctant as I am to do so, that this is, in essence, a political Bill fired by partisan interest. I know it is hard to credit, but I think I have to say it. It is fired by partisan interest rather than by a genuine desire to introduce meaningful legislation.

That is not to say that Ministers do not care about these matters—of course they do. Members of this House across the party divide care about these issues because they encounter them in their constituencies day by day. No political party has a monopoly on care or concern, or on decent people. However, it does Government no favours when they put that genuine concern to one side to pursue a narrowly political interest.

Phil Hope: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hayes: Having been so kind to the hon. Gentleman, I hope that he will be equally kind to me.

Phil Hope: That is my intention. The hon. Gentleman has spoken very eloquently, as he is wont to do. We have met on many occasions to debate many different topics in the past, and his erudition is there for us all to admire. He spoke eloquently about the importance of the home. Given that these proposals are about providing free personal care at home, I assume that I can look forward to seeing him in the Aye Lobby later this evening.

Mr. Hayes: I talked about the principle of the Bill being right, but I made it absolutely clear that I thought that its purpose was at best unclear and possibly worse, and suggested that it might have unintended consequences that were the negation of that principle. On that basis, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would hardly expect me misguidedly to follow the hon. Gentleman into the Aye Lobby and encourage the delusion—I am being generous in using that word—that lies at the heart of the Bill. I cannot believe that it is wicked, so it must be deluded.

Phil Hope: I am trying to work out where the hon. Gentleman stands. On that basis, I assume that he will be voting in the No Lobby against support for free personal care in people's own homes.

Mr. Hayes: No, because I retain my sense of optimism, as I think I have made perfectly clear in this all-too-brief contribution. That optimism leads me to conclude that it is just possible that the Ministers responsible for the Bill, and those who follow them on the Government Benches, will be persuaded by the case made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire and others that it could be improved—that, with reconsideration, it might grow into the bigger piece of legislation that we all acknowledge is necessary and that, indeed, the Government heralded in their Green Paper just a few short months ago. It is not the principle that is wrong—it is the Bill.

Phil Hope *rose*—

Mr. Hayes: I think the hon. Gentleman is rising to tell me that he has been persuaded by my argument.

Phil Hope: I am hugely persuaded by the possibility that the Conservatives, of whom the hon. Gentleman is a very eloquent representative, will support a comprehensive Bill on a National Care Service in future, as he has just said that he would like to see a much bigger Bill. May I take it from his remarks that the Conservative party is pledged to support the creation of a national care service in future?

Mr. Hayes: I try never to make policy on the hoof, as a matter of principle, but when I do, I try to ensure that it is in those areas for which I have Front-Bench responsibility.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's question, there is clearly a need to rethink this area of public policy; that is widely acknowledged. It was acknowledged in the Green Paper and identified by my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State in his speech. The reconsideration of this public policy area must take account of five criteria: first, a proper assessment of need, which means an assessment in terms of numbers and the character of that need; secondly, the views of all the organisations affected, by which I mean representative organisations, charitable organisations and local authorities; thirdly, a consideration of the implicit dynamism of this subject, because need changes rapidly and it is multi-faceted, so it requires the involvement of all kinds of specialists and skills, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham described; fourthly, some estimate of cost, which is sadly lacking in the Bill, not least because the consultation necessary to come to firm conclusions about cost has been imperfect or non-existent; and finally and fundamentally, a wraparound consideration of our societal objectives in respect of care.

This is a big debate that has been taking place for many years, and views on it have changed, developed and evolved. However, I think there is a growing consensus that where possible, care is best delivered in the kind of secure and familiar circumstances that the home exemplifies.

On the basis of those five criteria, I would be happy to consider where we might go further, but as I do not have specific responsibility for this matter I offer them merely as a point of discussion.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: I know that my hon. Friend will now translate them into Tory policy on this subject.

Mr. O'Brien: I am glad to find that my hon. Friend has been paying such close attention to areas outside his own brief that he has articulated party policy very adequately. He made a serious point, on which the Minister sought to challenge him, about the question of consensus. I think there is a mood in the House that we need to try to establish, where we can, a consensus on the way forward on an issue that we can all see is coming down the track not just for our political generation but for those who succeed us.

Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be quite interesting to get an invitation from Ministers to join them in a round-table discussion that might identify areas of consensus, and that we would be happy to accept it? Given the Minister's challenge to him, would not a good start be for the Minister to accept that if the Government amended the Bill to include our home protection scheme, that would protect not only the people whom he seeks to protect—a small number, according to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman)—but those whom we seek to protect, who are fearful because they might have to sell their homes to pay for long-term residential care?

Mr. Hayes: The Minister has positive form in that respect. It was his willingness to listen and learn that allowed him to shape Government policy on skills largely around my analysis, as he knows. I retain high hopes, and that optimism is borne out to some extent by the title of the Government's consultation paper, which, as my hon. Friend knows, was "Shaping the Future of Care Together". That is consensual by its very nature. So it is more in sorrow than in anger that I point out that after the promising beginning of a Green Paper to open up discussion, we have ended with a Bill on the back of a party conference speech. As the Minister knows, the Bill's narrow scope directly contradicts the wider focus of the Green Paper.

Phil Hope *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: I will give way one more time, but then I must move on to the main thrust of my argument.

Phil Hope: I noticed that the hon. Gentleman failed to take up the offer from his party's spokesman to support an amendment to the Bill that would incentivise people towards residential care rather than living in their own home. I assume that he did not pick up on that offer because, like me, he wants incentives that keep people living longer in their own homes.

Mr. Hayes: I listened closely to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire—I was having a cheese sandwich at the time, but I like to follow these things from near or far—and what he actually said was that an insurance model might well incentivise insurance companies to enable people to stay in their homes. That is far from the parody that the Minister paints. The insurance model that the Government identified as a possibility in the Green Paper could well be constructed to incentivise insurance companies to bring about exactly that outcome. I do not take such a limited view of the options the Government described in the Green Paper as the Minister has come to. He has done so rather hurriedly, given that it was published only recently.

It is clear that the No. 1 priority identified in the Green Paper is that we need more joined-up working. That has been touched on by contributors on both sides of the Chamber. The Green Paper states:

"We need services that will keep people independent and well for longer...through better joined-up working between health, housing and social care services and between social care and the disability benefits system."

As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have a long-standing interest in disability issues, and I wonder about the proposal that disability benefits should be redirected to local authorities to provide care. I wonder whether we are thus caught on the horns of a dilemma, on the one hand trying to provide more personalised care and on the other depersonalising the benefits system. Joined-up working necessitates proper discussion with local government and a proper assessment of how it will do the job that the Bill gives it.

The Green Paper mentions services

"fully joined up between the NHS and the new National Care Service."

However, I have heard nothing this evening to reassure me about the information provided by the health service to care services, or about the role of third-party organisations such as Headway, which helps many brain-injured people and with which I have been involved for many years. It allows people with acquired brain injury, often suffering from serious disability, to stay in their own homes. They are frequently younger people, whom we should not exclude from our considerations tonight.

Phil Hope *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hayes: I notice that the Minister freely acknowledges that. It is important that the views of organisations such as Headway be taken into account. Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that the support given to people in Headway houses, which provide support for carers as well as the young people affected, is properly accounted for in the Bill. I hope the Minister will say something about that area of policy.

The Green Paper also states that the benefits of a joined-up service are that

"people receive more appropriate care in the right setting, reducing costs, improving outcomes and ensuring that services work together to keep people healthy and active wherever possible."

I am not convinced that the Bill will ensure any of that. Its single substantial change will be made out of context and out of place and is born of short-term, limited and arguably political ambitions. As the King's Fund has warned, the Bill makes the Green Paper's proposals "incoherent". Age Concern and Help the Aged have spoken of the need for

"fundamental reform of the entire care system".

I and the Opposition Front Benchers anticipated the need for such a root-and-branch reform as a result of the Green Paper and the discussions it provoked. The Learning Disability Coalition has argued that the Bill contains "perverse incentives" that will prevent people from taking advantage of the most appropriate care.

Surely we need an holistic approach, as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, with an emphasis on more preventive care to ensure that more people stay in their own homes. That means that we must be sceptical about any plans for cuts in disability living allowance and attendance allowance, or any redirection of allowances into the care system that takes place without proper discussion and consultation with representative organisations.

I invite the Minister to answer one or two further questions. Will he clarify the marriage between the care budget and the various allowances that will feed the process financially? Will he say something about the estimates he has made of the displacement effect on local government? Will he draw a clearer picture of the effect on wider services that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham mentioned? My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, the shadow Minister, in summing up, will add to and amplify those questions, and he will of course have cleverer ones of his own, but speaking with an appropriate degree of humility on a subject of which my only knowledge is derived from representing the interests of my most vulnerable constituents, I ask the Minister, at least as a starting point, to deal with those fairly fundamental doubts.

T.S. Eliot wrote:

"Home is where one starts from".

and as I have said, it is also where we frequently return for care and support. The objective of facilitating more personal care at home is one that will be widely shared across the House, but it requires far greater consideration, and more careful reflection and proper planning, than is suggested by the Bill. To work, the measure must work well, and to do that, it must be carefully conceived and properly considered. We owe those who will be most affected by the Bill nothing less than that.

8.29 pm

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), who not only entertained but educated us in relation to the Bill. He orated to us in a way that we are now accustomed to, and has an intellectual status that we esteem and aspire to.

It is noticeable that this has almost been a Tory debate in the last hour or so—in fact, I cann[illegible]ee one Liberal Democrat Member, although a cou[illegible]our Members have wandered in and out. I am, [illegible] third consecutive Conservative speaker—

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD) *rose*—

Mr. Ellwood: I have woken the Liberal Democrat Member up and I am delighted to give way to him. No? He has nodded back off again.

As a representative of Bournemouth in Dorset, the issue of looking after the elderly, who are some of the most vulnerable people in our population, is pertinent. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings pointed out, it is about not only the elderly, but younger people—it is about those who are not able to look after themselves. Society therefore requires some form of safety net and security so that we can ensure that people have the type of care that we would all expect to receive in the same situation. At this point, I pay tribute to those who work in the care and support sector—not only the professionals, but the volunteers, including the many family members, who tirelessly devote many hours, days, weeks and years to looking after those who are close to them and important to them.

Winston Churchill talked about the importance of the safety net that society requires to capture those people who fall in their station in life, whether that is their own fault or otherwise. I should like to make a more modern analogy—the community that we are in is like those penguins found in Antarctica. When the sun is shining, we go about our business, enjoy ourselves and act as part of the community; but when times are tough and the storms come in, the penguins gather round in a tight-knit circle. In fact, they move around ever so slightly to keep those in the very centre warm and to ensure that those on the outside are exposed and vulnerable for only a very short period. That is exactly how society should work. When we require care, we are surrounded by the warmth of our community and its support, be that from the voluntary or private sectors or the state, to ensure that we can weather those difficult times. That is why one aspect of care is prevention—it is not always about what happens when care is required—but that is entirely absent from the Bill.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have been exposed to the care and support requirements of our community through my work as a Member of Parliament. Clearly, the confusing system that we have does not make it easy for those requiring access to care to ensure that they have what they expect. That was highlighted when I visited Douglas House in Boscombe in Bournemouth, which serves 16 severely disabled adults. It is a fantastic unit, and I pay tribute to those who work there. They are dedicated to looking after those severely disabled adults.

Unfortunately, forgetting the idea of choice, the Government want to close the centre down and push its residents into the community. I have not got a problem per se with the concept of allowing those involved, including parents, to decide to move someone who requires care into the community. However, those 16 families very much want to keep that place open. I understand that moving those who are currently at Douglas House into the community would cost five times more per person. I do not understand, if we are pushing the idea of choice, why the Government are telling Bournemouth and Poole primary care trust that it cannot keep Douglas House open.

I plead with the Minister to consider this. We have handed in a petition of more than 10,000 names to No. 10, but we have hit a brick wall. I reiterate that this is the desire of parents with children in that facility. We are not listening to the requirements and needs of those people, and that will cost the taxpayer more.

We need to recognise the importance of upgrading our care offering, and I am saddened by the fact that so few hon. Members are in the Chamber to debate this important subject. Their absence may be linked to the size of the Bill, because there is not much in it to debate. Every single hon. Member who has spoken has added things that they would have liked to see in the Bill.

[Mr. Ellwood]

The Secretary of State began by saying that the Bill is a great stride forward in the move to reconcile the care package provided in the United Kingdom, but the two minuscule clauses are simply election posturing. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) has pointed out, we will have an opportunity in Committee and in the other place to make this Bill into something of which we can be a little more proud. As it stands, it does not reflect 10 years of hard work by any Government.

The development of care policy by the Labour Government has been a story of procrastination. Back in 1997, the royal commission on long-term care was set the task of looking at the system and recommending a series of changes. It was not until 2008 that we had a six-month engagement process. That was useful, but it was a long time after the initial commission made its recommendations. We then had the Green Paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together", issued this year, with big statements about a National Care Service. It was a bold and radical proposal to shake up the care and support package available. Then we had the huge announcement by the Prime Minister at the Labour party conference of his intention to include a Bill in the Queen's Speech. In total, it has been a 13-year process, in which progress has been slow and which has not reflected the urgency that this subject requires.

Joan Ryan (Enfield, North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has referred to royal commissions and Green Papers. However, he has not mentioned the dramatic change in social care that has taken place on the ground, in the move towards personalised care and personal budgets. Perhaps he could say something about how that move is linked to the Bill.

Mr. Ellwood: I am not going to digress from my examination of the changes that should have taken place. We are here to debate the Second Reading of a Bill that is very small and does not do justice to the length of time that the Government have had to change the system, or to the sound work in the Green Paper. Many people who have done all that work and participated in consultations on the Green Paper will look at the Bill and ask, "Is that it?" They will be severely disappointed unless the Bill is radically changed in Committee or in the other place.

The exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings and the Minister was interesting. My hon. Friend was pondering which way to vote this evening. I hope that more of our hon. Friends will turn up to decide that, otherwise this will be a short debate. The question for the Minister is whether he would be willing and open enough to accept amendments tabled in Committee and in the other place to build on the opportunity provided by the Bill, separate to other initiatives on the ground. That, I think, is the test for the Minister himself. He is shying away from even looking at me now, so I suggest that the answer—

Phil Hope: I am writing copious notes.

Mr. Ellwood: The Minister says that he is writing copious notes. Well, it would be nice to get an indication, either now or in the winding-up speech, of whether this Government are open to amending the Bill to beef it up and make it something we can respect.

We are debating the Bill on Second Reading, which happens to fall three months before a general election. It looks like there has been a dash for policy and a rush to put a tick in a box, so I have to ask the Secretary of State, in his absence, whether he was constantly last in the queue when the Prime Minister was doling out time for Bills to be debated in Parliament. How many Parliaments have we had to go through before finally reaching the Second Reading of such a Bill? We now seem to have a concession: a small Bill squeezed in just before we go to the polls. That is a shameful exercise, I am afraid, considering the deterioration of the service, which has been remarked upon across the Chamber—the fall in the coverage of care and the rising costs of it over the past decade.

The timing of the Bill is certainly questionable. It is also questionable in relation to the Green Paper, because we are midway through a wider consultation on the aspects of social reform. My intervention—the first the Secretary of State took—was to ask why we are having this Bill now. He could not give me a clear answer; he could not acknowledge the fact that the Bill is part of an electoral cycle, rather than solid policy being put forward.

Also, we have to ask ourselves what is not in the Bill. It is thin on substance and there is little to disagree with, but there is little in the Bill in the first place. The costs of the Bill have not been outlined at all. Perhaps we will get more clarity in the winding-up speech. We have had the pre-Budget report, which included a black hole in the finances. We now have a Bill that includes a black hole in the finances. It is vague about how local authorities will foot the bill without having a knock-on impact on other services.

It is worth reminding ourselves what personal care means. It is personal hygiene, such as bathing, continence management and assistance with eating; personal assistance, such as dressing and so forth; and simple treatment. It does not include nursing, which is not seen as part of personal care. The Labour royal commission on long-term care, which reported in 1999, recommended that long-term care should be split into living costs, housing costs and personal care, and that personal care should be available after an assessment and paid out of general taxation. Most of the recommendations were accepted, but not that one concerning personal care. The reason cited was that there were not enough resources.

It is peculiar that we have just had a huge recession—the biggest since the second world war—and suddenly finances seem to have been made available.

Mr. Edward Timpson (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): In the light of those comments, does not my hon. Friend find it rather strange that the explanatory notes state:

"The Government's view is that the Bill has little overall effect on public sector manpower and public expenditure"?

Yet here we are, talking about the resources that will be required to put through what at the moment is a flimsy, unfunded Bill. We know that the costs will be much greater than the Government are willing to admit.

Mr. Ellwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. Perhaps it is timely that the Secretary of State has returned to the Chamber, because he might be

able to clarify the exact cost to the Exchequer of this Bill—not just the up-front costs, but, as my hon. Friend suggests, the funding requirement for the extra staff who will be required to implement what is proposed here. That is not clear at all.

The next big document that the Government produced—a number of years later, in July 2009—was the Green Paper entitled "Shaping the Future of Care Together". Having digested that document, I have to say that there are many interesting ideas in it. It puts together a wide array of issues, and a number of pieces of the jigsaw are there. However, the Government have chosen to take just one piece of that jigsaw and promote it today, completely missing the wider context of what else is happening in care.

That Green Paper, which I hope the Secretary of State might be willing to look back at, points out that the current system is based on legacy and calls for bold reform, such as that which created the NHS. By changing things in incremental steps and limiting the objectives, things will begin to overlap and we will end up with a confusing structure. Rather than heeding the advice of the Green Paper, we are ignoring it and just coming out with another little building block to add to the confusing layers that we already have.

The scale of the problem is evident. We are all living longer. It is estimated that, by 2026, 1.7 million adults will expect care in one form or another. One in two men will expect some form of care as they get older, and two in three women will have high care needs. The problem will not go away. The type of care available will also become more complex, as advances in science are made. People's expectations will increase, yet what we have today is confusion over funding. Wide variations of care are offered, with standards differing from council to council across the country. That is another example of the postcode lottery, but I do not see how the Bill will challenge that.

Money is not always appropriately spent. As I mentioned earlier, so much more effort could be invested in prevention, rather than in a cure. The current system is effectively a means-tested structure, so savings are used to pay for care. As has been reiterated time and again, we now see a requirement for people to sell their property in order to pay for the care that they will need. That is scandalous.

Labour's big idea was the creation of the National Care Service, which was to be

"a universal and sustainable system which empowers people to live their lives the way they want to",

providing access and support to people regardless of location; an easily understood system with agreed levels of assessments across the country, based on personal circumstances and recognising individuals' ability to pay, and all fully co-ordinated with the NHS and, of course, fair and affordable. That is a bold statement. That is radical. That is what we should be working towards in this Bill.

Andy Burnham *indicated assent.*

Mr. Ellwood: The Secretary of State nods, but why is he just nodding with me, rather than having that written in the proposal before us?

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend will have noted, as I did when he was quoting the Green Paper, that it included remarks about recognising people's ability to pay. The proposal in the legislation before us is that people with higher care needs should be given free personal care regardless of their ability to pay. The principles for the National Care Service that the Government set out in the Green Paper are therefore not the principles on which they propose to legislate.

Mr. Ellwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification on one of the many issues that will undoubtedly be scrutinised further in this Second Reading debate, as we highlight the Bill's shortfalls.

On cost, the funding proposals are completely vague. This has been stated already, but the care requirements or needs of the average 65-year-old will probably be around £30,000 over their lifetime. In reality, that amount could be only £1,000, but in other cases, extra care—more detailed and more complex care—is required, the cost of which can reach £50,000.

The Bill has two simple clauses. The first concerns the removal of the six-week limit on the provision of care offered for free, while the second is almost just a tidying-up exercise, linking Wales with England. It really is a pathetic Bill, considering where we are in the whole process of designing a new care system, costing around £670 million, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire said. The Secretary of State's claim is that the Bill is the first step towards a National Care Service. What a shame that we do not have the other steps, and that we are only now debating the initial stage, when we could have done so much in the past 10 years.

The Bill guarantees free personal care for about 280,000 people, although that figure requires clarification. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber will disagree with the proposals, but, time and again, hon. Members have pointed to what is missing, and to what a missed opportunity this is. Attached to the Bill is, of course, another consultation, on proposals for regulations and guidance. All this is coming out in the lead-up to the general election that is just around the corner.

It is interesting to read the research paper on the Bill produced by the House of Commons Library, which is a neutral body. On page 10, it provides comments from other organisations and agencies. Andrew Harrop, the head of policy for Age Concern, stressed:

"It will be essential that councils are properly funded to provide this care so that there is not an incentive for them to push older people into care homes or claim that their needs are not critical enough to warrant free care at home."

Jane Ashcroft, chairman of the English Community Care Association,

"queried why the Government had not introduced the policy at the same time as the green paper on social care."

Consumer watchdog Which? viewed the Bill as "a missed opportunity". Lord Lipsey, a former member of the royal commission on long-term care, is quoted as saying:

"I think it is a bad policy but also a very bad way to do policy just to find a nice highlight for your Labour Party conference speech."

Those are voices that we should respect. They are critical of the Bill, saying that we should think again on these issues.

I think that we all agree that an advanced, civilised society needs a fair, accessible and compassionate care and support system that allows people to live their lives

[Mr. Ellwood]

to the full and meets the needs of people as they grow older in an affordable way. The Government have proved that there is some vision, as was highlighted in the Green Paper, but the Bill is far from having any vision at all. The Government have woken up to the urgency of the need for reform very late in the day, despite gaining a head start more than a decade ago when they were prompted by the commission to go in this direction.

This is a timid Bill, and it falls short of many people's aspirations, including many in the industry. In the introduction to the Green Paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together", the Prime Minister says:

"What is now needed is a major debate about the challenge we face and the options for addressing it."

I would hardly call what we have had today a major debate. We have been denied that, because nothing major has been put in front of us. The Bill is not properly financed. It comes without a proper impact assessment. It gives little clarity on how the provisions will dovetail with the NHS, and provides no indication of how many extra staff will be needed. It is a pathetic piece of the bigger jigsaw set out in the Green Paper.

On top of all this, we have a programme motion—which we have yet to talk about—that will limit the amount of time for debating the Bill. Proper debate might just add to the Bill, either in Committee or in the House of Lords. This is a rushed Bill, and it represents a missed opportunity. It has very little chance of getting on to the statute book. It has just one aim, and that is not to help the vulnerable people across Britain but to help a vulnerable individual in No. 10. If this is the best that Labour can muster after a decade to help those in need of care in Britain, it is proof—if any more were needed—that Labour has run out of ideas and that it is time for a general election.

8.53 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich, North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood). I will also begin by describing the confusion surrounding the Bill. As many Members have said, the Bill is part of a much bigger picture. I hope that the House will forgive me if I lighten the tone by sharing a feature of the Smith family's multi-generational Christmases, following the evocation of Dickens in the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes). The Bill is a bit like one of those mystery jigsaws. We start with a bit of sky and a bit of grass, but we have to fill in the rest as best we can because there is no picture to guide us—

Mr. Ellwood: They have lost the lid.

Chloe Smith: Absolutely.

I follow on from the Lord Lipsey quotation already given:

"What has gone wrong is that in the middle of the consultation... the prime minister has declared that it is government policy for people with severe care needs in their own home to be paid in full"

I will come on to what we all think about that principle, but to try another analogy and to bring back the idea of homes, this is like trying in a consensual way to build a community of homes that will withstand the future, only to find that on one plot in the street there is a jerry-built shed which might well shelter some in a storm but which has not been made with the care and forethought that the whole project requires.

Considering that we are looking for a White Paper in 2010 to follow the Green Paper that came this year, it is not enough simply to say that we need something rather than nothing—that something will do in the place of everything. We cannot hide the haste of a piece of legislation that, as ably noted earlier, has only two clauses and yet has been 12 years in the making. That is not the way I or many people outside this place would expect to go about such weighty matters as personal care at home—raising false expectations on the back of something that might turn out to be very poor quality. I shall return to that.

Of course I join colleagues in welcoming the concept of personal care at home and, for many people, the concept of personal care at an affordable or zero price for those who need it. Nobody wants to be pushed out of their home; nobody wants to face high costs at particularly hard times and in emergency circumstances; nobody wants to be dependent on others or, indeed, on impersonal caring environments; nobody wants to lose any dignity; and nobody wants to be uncertain or to be the victim of a postcode lottery. However, we must be cautious in what we do from that position.

I said in last week's debate, tangentially on the Green Paper but specifically on the continuation of the attendance allowance and the disability living allowance, that we must proceed with clarity on those issues, because we are dealing with a section of society that is often very vulnerable, but for the same reason we must go with caution. We rather randomly concluded in last week's debate that we should not approach the topic with heightened political emotions, but it is equally important to get it right. It is important not to get it wrong for the same reason as given last week—the size of the question ahead of us. There is still a demographic bomb ahead of us, so the scale of getting this wrong is important. As many Members have pointed out, the scale of the task is, frankly, unknown, but the scale of getting it wrong looms ever larger as an exponential problem ahead of us. I am afraid that putting one small piece of the jigsaw in place is simply not enough in this case because of that characteristic.

Christopher Fraser: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Does she agree with me that in large counties such as Norfolk—a great county that both she and I represent—with disparate communities in both rural and urban areas, a one-size-fits-all solution will not work, because some councils will be able to afford the provision and others will not?

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I will come to what our local authority has had to say on this matter, as I have had conversations about it. He is right that the aspiration to end the postcode lottery may well be laudable, but the practicalities of getting it right are far harder.

I will now deal briefly with costs and how the proposal might work, on the basis of the bare detail that we have been given so far. I cannot resist noting a comment made from the Government Front Bench earlier that the proposal will be subject to the "normal spending

review process". It is a shame that the Secretary of State has disappeared again, as I wanted to put it to him that it is a shame that we have had no comprehensive spending review to help us determine how it fits into the bigger picture, in terms not only of the health budget but of where our country is going.

The Secretary of State has told us that the Bill will require a contribution of £420 million from his coffers and a further £250 million from those of local authorities. As has been suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Christopher Fraser), and also by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), the co-ordination that the policy demands from local authorities is one of the main problems that we face. Informal discussions in which I have engaged with Norfolk county council, the local authority that I share with my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk, suggest that the council could incur a cost of £5 million. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that that could add up to £250 million if spread over an appropriate number of authorities on an annual basis. It should be borne in mind that Norfolk has already had to squeeze £15 million of efficiency savings out of next year's budget.

Mr. Timpson: Does my hon. Friend agree that whenever the Government present a new policy or a new Bill to the House, the cost of implementing that new policy or Bill seems to fall on local authorities, which are having to make saving after saving? Is she still unaware, as I am, of the total efficiency savings that the Government are asking authorities to make over the next year and beyond?

Chloe Smith: I share my hon. Friend's perplexity. I know that my local authority will struggle to find more money in addition to the efficiency savings that, because it is a scrupulous and forward-thinking authority, it has already had to identify. Moreover, much of the work that that forward-thinking authority has tried to do will be imperilled, including some of its work on prevention in this very policy area.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk will know that, thanks to the Government, Norfolk is currently subject to local government reorganisation, which means that a particular burden falls on our local authorities and also those in Suffolk and Devon. That involves a cost for which central Government refuse to foot the bill. Having said that we must take this action, they then say, "We will not give you any money for it and, what is more, you had better not raise council tax to finance it." That is an enigma wrapped in a puzzle wrapped in any other Churchillian quote that Members may choose to employ—

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Wrapped in a jigsaw.

Chloe Smith: Indeed—and still with no picture on the lid.

I want to make one more point about costs before I deal with other aspects of the Bill. According to answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), the Government's contribution is not connected with whatever action they want to take in relation to attendance allowance and disability living allowance. I am almost tempted to ask, "If that is the case, why?" Either the Bill is connected with the Green Paper and therefore connected with those benefits, or it is not. That is another question that the Minister must answer.

Let me now raise the issue of fairness. I believe that the worst risk posed by the Bill is that it endangers real reform. It pays for what is, on the overall scale of things, almost a minor reform, and it potentially helps people who are not the poorest in society. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire pointed out, that principle is not in the Green Paper. The Government seem to be operating on the basis of two entirely different principles, at a time of soaring national debt. It is not as if there are spare pounds floating around that can be thrown any which way.

Nowadays we must be particularly careful to scrutinise any item of public spending, and Members are wary of poor quality. Many of us welcome the idea of free personal care at home, which is a wonderful principle, but the poor quality that we risk with legislation such as this may be the enemy of the people whom the Government—and we—are so keen to help. Other Members have already spoken about the aspect of quality that I wish to dwell upon: the staffing implications of these measures. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham made the point very strongly. In an intervention on her, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) said that we must find staff to make this change happen anyway, but that will not necessarily be the case. It is much easier to find staff to operate a well planned, well oiled and well funded system than it is to find adequately trained staff to operate a system such as that planned for October of next year, which, frankly, looks like a black hole at present. The Royal College of Nursing says:

> "It is essential that those with the highest needs receive the highest quality of personal care. With only 10 months until these measures come into force the RCN is concerned that there may not be sufficient numbers of properly trained social care staff and community nurses to meet the undoubted increased demand for care, which will follow from the introduction of these measures."

I fully agree. There is a real risk that a hasty introduction of these measures will lead to a gap in the provision of properly trained and funded staff, which will imperil some of our society's most vulnerable people, whom all Members wish to help.

Time and again, MPs hear horror stories on this topic from their constituents. I suspect that I have heard fewer than many other Members, but the message comes across loud and clear none the less. There are stories about carers who leave the elderly person in their care alone for most of the day, and turn up when they think that it is time for breakfast, which might be noon or 7 pm—or whatever time chosen by the carers who have been found to fill those personal care gaps. That is not a vision of personalised care; rather, it is a nightmare for many of our constituents. We risk that becoming a reality by introducing these measures with such haste.

In this debate, all Members should be focusing on the value of good care staff. I am not sure that such a hasty introduction of these measures will allow us to fit that into the system, however. Proper planning for the requisite training takes years, but this Government have done the following things to hinder that. They have let the Learning and Skills Council go bust. They have also let my local further education college become stranded with insufficient classrooms because of a capital funding crisis—I am

[Chloe Smith]

sure many other Members' FE colleges are in the same situation. This Government have let higher education students—some of whom may be involved in providing more specialist needs—suffer with no funding until Christmas.

Also, the apprenticeship system has been asphyxiated, and a huge variation in training has developed—in the experiences that people are able to access, in whether red tape holds them back and prevents them from training properly, and in what places can be promised to younger people seeking training or to older people seeking to do their best for society. That is our current training picture, and we must ask ourselves how it will affect the system that the Minister is looking to have in place in 10 months' time.

I am tempted to conclude by asking the Minister whether he agrees with me that the following very simple precautions would assist the Bill in its passage. It should be part of a larger reform. It should also help, rather than hinder, local authorities. It should give the Minister the opportunity to ask his colleagues to provide clarity and consistency in other sectors around this one, such as further education. The Minister might also consider instituting a licence to practise, or any other measures that could improve the safeguards in this area for vulnerable people, whom we all care about.

The sad truth is, however, that the Minister cannot agree to those simple precautions, because, as Members have already picked up, he does not know the numbers. None of us knows how many people will be involved in this system. We can estimate the number of people who pay for their own care at present, but we cannot estimate how many more will come forward when such an incentive is offered. We cannot therefore estimate the full costs of this policy, or the number of trained staff that will be required to fulfil it and make the dream that we all wish for, of proper social care and personal care in the home, become a reality.

There is a final thing that, through this Bill, the Minister is not allowing local authorities such as Norfolk county council to do. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) back in his place; he is the third Norfolk Member in the Chamber, so we are doing well. The legislation does not allow local authorities to deal with the demographics of the future. An enormous squeeze is coming down the line, not only in public spending—we all are, or should be, painfully aware of that—but in the number of people who will require such care in the future, whatever the incentives to provide it or to pay for it. The numbers are the key, but this Bill contains almost none. It certainly does not contain the numbers to allow us to scrutinise it properly. As the Bill is not connected to the bigger picture, it does not allow us to look ahead to the challenges coming down the track. I can but look forward to the day when the Minister looks up and gives us that bigger picture.

9.10 pm

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith), because I agreed with a great deal of what she said. May I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House for missing part of this evening's debate? I was chairing a meeting of the all-party group on dementia. As the Secretary of State said, many people with dementia will be directly affected by what the Government propose.

I wish to start my contribution, as many have done, by applauding the Government's intention—it is right that we should do so. There are few more important issues than social care and it is right to make a start on this, but we cannot accuse the Government, over most of their term of office, of legislating with breakneck speed on it. The Wanless report, which asked a number of important questions about social care, was followed a considerable number of years later by a Green Paper that asked all those questions again, and now we have before us a Bill that proposes to answer part of one of them.

If the Bill is even to do that, it needs to deliver on its promises, and that is where I am in entire agreement with my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North and with others who have made this point. If the Bill is incapable of meeting the expectations that it has raised, not least by its title, it will be a cruel deception for those who are most reliant on social care and who will hope for most as a result of what the Government are proposing to do. That is why the uncertainty over the potential demand for free social care—the Government have not set out the terms of that in the Bill, but I hope that they will do so in the regulations that will follow it—is so important. This is about the unknown impacts on those currently funding social care themselves who may subsequently approach the state for free social care, of those who will not subsequently choose residential care as otherwise they might have done, and perhaps even of those in residential care who may choose to leave that care and return home to be cared for there—as we know, many prefer such an option.

As my hon. Friend said, if we do not know what the demand will be, we do not know what the cost will be. We have heard that the estimate of the cost for the first year is £670 million, £250 million of which is expected to come from local government efficiency savings—one can only imagine the joy with which that news was greeted in town halls up and down the land. The remaining £420 million is expected to come from the Department of Health's research and development, marketing and consultancy budgets. I refuse to believe that the Government spend anything like £420 million on the Department of Health's marketing and consultancy budgets, so a substantial amount of the sum must be expected to come from the research and development budget. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure me, and the House, that that will not affect the crucial work that goes on, not least in the field of dementia, where we already spend too little on research. If we do not spend a great deal more, it is very unlikely that we will find the cure that we hope for or, failing that, effective treatments, which will reduce the demand on our social care system in the first place.

If there is a gap in funding—it is at the very least foreseeable that there might be, given the uncertainty, as we have heard, about the figures—who will pay for that gap? Will it be local or national Government? I rather agree with my hon. Friends who suspect that the answer is likely to be local government once again. We must be sure, if that is the case, that it will be given adequate support to enable it to carry that burden.

Let me say a word or two about the detail of the Bill. I agree with many who have spoken that reablement—although I am with my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) on the elegance, or lack thereof, of that term—is a crucial point. It is vital that we get people back into being able to deal with their own daily lifestyle needs to the extent that we can and to the extent that they can. However, I am concerned about the practical implication of that. It seems to me to be inconceivable that in order to move to a process of helping someone with reablement, there should not first be some form of assessment to ensure that they will benefit from the process. That means that there will be one assessment to ensure that somebody is suitable for reablement, a process of reablement and then another assessment, assuming that that is appropriate, to decide whether they are entitled to free social care under the criteria.

We all know that assessment takes a long time—we all deal with constituency cases weekly that involve long-running processes of assessment, assuming that there are enough people to carry out the assessments in the first place, as my hon. Friend said. We also have to assume that we are capable of withstanding the extra pressure on the system that will inevitably be caused by the extra demand for the extra social care provision. That will include many people who have substantial care needs, but not quite the critical care needs required for the free social care, who will ask and expect to be given a reassessment. A great deal more assessment will suddenly need to be done, and if that assessment and extra demand on the assessment system are going to cause further delay, that is a concern. There will be a big step between those who are assessed as having substantial care needs and those assessed as having critical care needs, in much the same way as we experience with NHS continuing health care.

Let us be charitable, however, and assume that we can establish whom we will be paying under this scheme and how we will pay for it. We still have to answer the question of what we will be paying for. I do not want to revisit the debate that we had last week on attendance allowance and disability living allowance, but the freedom to spend the money that one receives in the way that one chooses was crucial to that debate and, I suggest, it is important in this one, too. The Minister will have seen, as I am sure many other hon. Members have, that Carers UK, in its response to the Bill, which I accept broadly welcomed it, also expressed concern about the situation of those families where family members are prepared to offer care in the home but would value assistance with other things such as gardening, shopping, transport and so on. We have to ask whether the provisions will enable such families sufficient flexibility to have what they need rather than what the Government wish to give them. We come back to the question of how committed the Government are to their personalisation agenda, to which I fully subscribe.

There are broader issues, too, about what we pay for. The Minister has heard me talk before about what is commissioned. That point applies to residential care but, in this context, it applies particularly to domiciliary care. We must consider not only how we pay for this, but, alongside that, what we are paying for. We must ask ourselves whether commissioners are commissioning the right things and whether they should, as they do all too often now, be commissioning for blocks of time—such as commissioning 15 minutes for a particular task—or whether there is a better way of commissioning good quality care. We have to ask whether it is acceptable for a different agency care worker to arrive on someone's doorstep every day of the week, when the advantages of having someone they know and trust and for whom they can leave the door open while they take the dog for a walk are considerable.

Those are substantial issues that are as fundamental as the question of who pays for the care that is delivered. That is why it is regrettable that we are dealing with these issues piecemeal and we do not have the opportunity to consider what is being provided on domiciliary care, as well as who should pay for it. This issue is, as others have said, too important to deal with in a piecemeal fashion. We should not have had to wait for 12 years, from when one Labour Prime Minister said in a conference speech that it was very important to deal with social care and that it would be a disgrace if we did not. Now, suddenly, because another Labour Prime Minister wanted an eye-catching initiative to fill a passage in a speech, we have to legislate in haste to make things happen.

A potential problem with the Bill is the fact that it has a big title but not much content beneath it. Aside from raising hopes unduly, it would be tragic if we were to miss the opportunity to discuss more substantially, even at the end of this Parliament, the big issues surrounding social care. Another problem with the Bill is the fact that it does not answer with authority questions about whom exactly it would help, how it would help them and how much it would cost to do so. It does not even try to answer the bigger questions that are thrown up by the social care debate for us all to address. That is a shame, and we could and should do better.

9.20 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): May I begin by apologising to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to right hon. and hon. colleagues, for arriving so late for this important debate? I was in Blackpool with the Secretary of State for Transport, who was making a very important announcement in the town. *[Interruption.]* I could digress into the electrification of the Blackpool to Preston line, but I shall not. That is a debate for another occasion, especially as I have so little time.

It is interesting to follow so many Opposition Members, and I am heartened that there seems to be unanimity. I hope that that has been displayed in the essential focus on what the Government are attempting to do, which is to provide care at home, free of charge, to the people who are deemed to be in the most critical need and at most risk. I am surely not the only Member of Parliament who finds, when they speak to adults with disabilities and to elderly people who are in need of social care, that those people much prefer to be cared for in their homes. The more domiciliary care that we can offer to such people, therefore, the better. Lest anyone should misunderstand me, let me explain that I visit a lot of residential care and nursing homes, many of which are of a high quality. Representing a seaside town, as I do, I know that many people retire to the seaside and that some prefer to go into residential care when they are very elderly. The majority of those whom I meet, however, would much rather be supported in their own homes. That is why the Bill is so important. I have not met one such person who has disputed what we are trying to do.

[Mrs. Joan Humble]

Everybody that I have mentioned the Bill to fully welcomes it, so let us start from that premise and move on to the questions that we need to ask so that we can get things right. The hon. Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith) made that point. We need to get the issue right, and to do so we need clarity about the sorts of people to whom we are providing a service, how that service will be assessed and whether there is sufficient funding to pay for a quality service. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister cares passionately about social care, and he will also want to get things right and to ensure that those issues are addressed and explored in more detail as the Bill goes through the House.

I, too, want to place the Bill in the context of the Green Paper—an exciting document that cannot be seen in isolation. I disagree with Opposition Members on this point. It is a mistake to look at what has happened in social care simply through White Papers, Green Papers and royal commissions, because an awful lot has been happening on the ground. There has been a transformation in the delivery of social care with the whole personalisation agenda, direct payments and individual budgets. Also, the way in which professional social workers assess the needs of their client groups has changed dramatically. I want to ask the Minister how all those positive moves in the personalisation agenda can be carried forward in the Bill.

We need to look at the assessment and eligibility criteria. My hon. Friend the Minister is working closely with professional social workers and is doing all he can to raise their status. They need to know how they are to assess need under the Bill. Age Concern has produced a long list of questions, which I am sure he has seen, and he will know the sort of issues that are being raised.

If a person previously received a personal budget, what would happen to that budget? How will the personalisation agenda affect them? Will they still have a say about the intensive care they are receiving that will no longer be charged? If they are in that critical category, will their informal carers—family members—be able to have a say? The role of informal carers is important and their voice must be heard, but separately from the individual who is being cared for. That individual must have an assessment of their needs and the informal carer too should have an assessment of their needs. To pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright), we can do both: we can have an intensive package of domiciliary care for the individual who needs it, while also looking at the needs of the carer. I know of excellent befriending schemes, such as care and repair schemes that offer the gardening help he talked about, or that allow respite care for informal carers.

The Bill should not be considered in isolation, but as part of the package that is offered.

Jeremy Wright: I accept that we can do both, but there needs to be sufficient flexibility in the system to allow people to have what they want rather than simply to be given what they are expected to take. That is the concern.

Mrs. Humble: But that is the whole point of the personalisation agenda, and why I very much welcome it. The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Norwich, North gave instances of poor service. We have all heard of individuals raised from their beds by people coming in at 6 o'clock in the morning—or at 10 o'clock in the morning or even 12 noon. People should get up when they want to and that is where the personalisation agenda came in. Individuals could choose their carer and tell them, "Right, I've got my personal budget and I am paying you to come in. This is when I want to get up. This is when I want to go to bed, and this is what I want to do in between." I hope the personalisation agenda will be a key process in the implementation of the legislation.

Appropriate links with the health service will also be a key element. I recently visited the Bispham nurse-led rehabilitation unit in my constituency where I saw excellent rehabilitation reablement work. My hon. Friend the Minister needs to look at linking the rehabilitation reablement work done in the health service with that done in social care. People with the intense needs covered by the Bill will be receiving support from both health and social care. The two organisations have to work together, not just on delivering integrated packages of care but also in the reablement process.

My final point is about funding. As somebody who spent 12 years in local government, seven of them as chair of Lancashire social services, I am well aware of the pressures on social services budgets. My hon. Friend needs to look carefully at ensuring that there is sufficient money in the system to deliver the quality services that he and I want. With that, I warmly welcome the Bill and I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's comments.

9.29 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble), who is from Conservative-controlled Lancashire.

As the former Prime Minister, John Major, might have said, this is not an insignificant day. It was another former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who promised at the 1997 Labour party conference that no one should have to sell their home to fund their long-term care. Twelve years on we are debating the first bit of relevant legislation. There were three Labour Back-Bench speeches, none from the Liberal Democrats, and no fewer than six from Conservative Back Benchers. If ever there was a true benchmark of care, that is it.

One question that Ministers must ponder is how they could do more through the Bill. *Which?* called it "a missed opportunity". The House will recall that the policy behind the Bill was announced by the Prime Minister in his speech to his so-called comrades at the Labour party conference. Cleared just 20 minutes before the Prime Minister's announcement, there was no hint of the policy in any of the preceding debate. It undermines the Green Paper process, and the speed of its gestation puts the policy on infirm evidential ground. Let us take, for example, the use of a blog as an authoritative source in paragraph 5.27 of the regulatory impact assessment: "see http://healthcare-legislation.blogspot.com/2009/11/does-acturarial-value-trump-medical-loss.html". That must be a first.

Lord Lipsey, who sits on the Labour Benches in the other place, branded the Bill a "gimmick" and said that "it is a bad policy but also a very bad way to do policy just to find a nice highlight for your Labour Party conference speech."

If Ministers can churn out that policy in a couple of days and try to rush it through Parliament with only a single day in Committee of the whole House—patently a ruse to bypass questioning and to bang it through for, as some say, electoral purposes; surely not—and if they can expedite the Bill, could they not also, given that the Green Paper consultation has concluded, support legislation to address some or all of the other parts of the social care waterfront? As my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) asked in a trenchant speech, "Is that it?"

One way that the Government could show their earnest in their call for a consensus is by agreeing to amend the Bill to bring into effect our home protection scheme, a policy that deals with another part of the social care agenda, for which the costs can be much more catastrophic to individuals than even those for the critical level of domiciliary care. We never claimed that our scheme would solve all the issues, but it is an essential part of such a solution.

The House must remember that the Bill deals only with those with critical needs. Those whose needs are substantial, moderate or low are ignored. It addresses only those who stay at home. Those who opt for, or have to go into, residential care are left out. In the Green Paper, the Government said that in 2012 there would be 6 million people with care needs. The policy that we are debating claims to help just 270,000, and even that figure has been called into question. It represents less than 5 per cent. of the total. The point was highlighted against his own Government by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), who said that the Bill covered only a small part of care need, not the total architecture. It is our hope that the Government will expand the Bill's horizon and ambition.

The Government must do more to assure us that the Bill will not fall foul of the Human Rights Act. It has one of the longest depositions to the human rights committee that I have ever seen. The Government must work hard to suggest that it is not unfair to give people a differing amount of state support, depending on where they live. Many organisations, such as the Learning Disability Coalition, have expressed concern at the perverse incentive that the Bill could provide for people, who would be better in residential care, to stay in domiciliary care against all personalisation principles—the very issue about which the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood expressed concern.

According to the impact assessment, the purpose of the Bill is

"Funding care to those in need at the time of their need"—

close to what the Prime Minister said at his conference, and uniquely for a policy of this Government, seeking to provide peace of mind to everybody. However, the Government changed the purpose for the European convention on human rights sign-off to

"enabling, supporting and encouraging more people to avoid or delay entering residential accommodation".

The former and, some might say, real purpose of the Bill might well fall foul of the courts, so we need to ensure that the Bill does not proceed through the House on a flawed basis. That is just one more reason for more time in Committee than the proposed day on the Floor of the House.

In the course of a comprehensive, tour de force of a speech by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who opened for the Opposition, the concern was also raised that the legislation incentivises care homes to re-brand as extra care. The hon. Member for South Thanet picked up that point, too, although, in an otherwise very fair-minded speech, he did not seem to grasp the argument that the Opposition have cogently made. Given how the Bill might operate, there is no indication that a care home will have to do anything more than bill its residents separately for accommodation on the one hand and care on the other to qualify, under the terms of the Bill, as an establishment that does not provide accommodation together with care. That could bring the whole 500,000-person strong, £1.2 billion cost of residential care within the ambit of the scheme.

There are questions about reablement, a word that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) found difficult to deal with. Let us call it occupational therapy, if she prefers. Will it be available to those with palliative care needs who can live for many years? Why have the Government assumed that one quarter of people will not be processed—a worrying enough word in itself—each year? Will the Bill's stipulation that reablement must come before free care create a perverse incentive to councils to delay reablement work? That is another key area, and it clearly needs deep Committee scrutiny if we are to get to the bottom of it.

There is little joy for carers in the Bill, as the assessments will not be carer-blind. The Government have put ever-increasing pressure on carers, and the Bill is likely to exacerbate that. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) echoed that concern in his interventions on value and, even, non-financial value—something about which the Secretary of State was concerned when he was a Minister.

The Secretary of State has also spread confusion about the NHS "taking over" social care. Despite the pre-briefing, nothing new was announced, but now councils think that they are about to be shot of the problem. Furthermore, the narrow focus on care rather than support might mean that people who could stay in their homes will be driven into residential care. That is the very mischief that the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) persistently, wrongly and, I am sure, without any party political slant at all seeks to portray as the problem, as he perceives it, with our very well-received home protection scheme. Scope says:

"By overlooking the needs of deafblind people to communication support, the government is in effect excluding a group of people who are most at risk of having to enter residential accommodation."

Another area with which the Government are, frankly, playing fast and loose is the finances of the scheme, a point clearly and compassionately made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham on behalf of her constituents. They include my elderly parents-in-law, who are in receipt of the very good services in Bromley and, let it be said, vitally, the attendance allowance that helps them to stay in their own home—with all the benefits that that brings.

The impact assessment provides costing only for two and a quarter years. I have never read an impact assessment that has not costed a policy for at least 10 years. The period of two and a quarter years brings us to a certain

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

magical part of the calendar and is clearly another part of the impact assessment's panic drafting. The Government's own Green Paper looked to 2050, and, in this vital area, that is the span that we all know we must consider.

The impact assessment confesses that there is "inherent uncertainty" in estimating the costs. I asked the Government, through parliamentary questions, to extrapolate the amount, even using contemporary assumptions, but they repeatedly refused. Doing it myself, therefore, I found that the policy will cost at least £1.2 billion a year by 2030. If their assumptions are wrong by just 1 per cent., and that is almost guaranteed with this Government, that will add about £40 million to a £650 million cost in the first year.

The Local Government Association is particularly concerned that the Government have "underestimated". If the Government are serious about this policy being part of the reform of the system, they must bring forward the proper costings, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) said in a wide-ranging, exemplary and significant contribution that had his constituents' interests at heart throughout.

During the general debate on health and social care reform on 29 October, in response to some pressure from Members on the Government Benches, the Secretary of State ruled out funding from general taxation because it would not

"be fair across the generations to ask the working-age population to pay for the costs of care"

and

"it would not be honest or straightforward to give the impression that we can fully fund a care system entirely from general taxation."—[*Official Report*, 29 October 2009; Vol. 498, c. 479-81.]

Those reasons were also cited in the Green Paper. He therefore needs to explain why it is "honest" or "fair" to do that through this policy but not the whole reform, and how a policy clearly at odds with the principle of the Green Paper can be said to be in its direction of travel—a point ably highlighted in a comprehensive speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith). It was precisely this tension that led my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), in a clear and caring speech that focused on his constituents' needs, to argue so powerfully for the detailed and adequate scrutiny of the Bill—that is, in a proper Committee stage instead of one day on the Floor of the House.

Furthermore, Ministers have not yet come clean on exactly which budgets they are slashing to pay for this measure. Some £250 million, which was spun as a real-terms cut in the pre-Budget report, is set to come from as yet unrealised local government "efficiency savings"; in other words, they are going to spend it on this instead. Many organisations, including the Learning Disability Coalition, Age UK and Sue Ryder Care, have pointed out that this

"could mean cuts for other people with care needs".

The LGA has said:

"It is difficult to see how local government could meet the cost of this proposal from current plans for efficiency savings, without the lifting of other burdens."

When pressed through parliamentary questions, Ministers have given the reply, devoid of hope for these organisations, that setting charges for social care is a matter for local authorities. We know that the Government are also taking it out of research budgets but have not yet identified which ones, generating great concern particularly among cancer charities and—as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright), whose speech was, as always so focused given the information and expertise that he has in chairing the all-party group on dementia—among dementia charities, to whom the Minister of State only recently pledged more funding. The Government are also taking it out of the NHS IT budget, which funds a programme that, according to Ministers, was all about patient safety, patient care and a more efficient use of public money—until last weekend, when it became, to quote the Chancellor, "frankly...not essential for the front line".

It is important that Ministers clarify exactly where the money is coming from. The House will see that this scrabbling together of money from different pots shows that the Government seem to have no idea of how to fund this measure in the long term.

On the positive side, one of the exciting additions to the Bill could be legislation to underpin our home protection scheme. This would enable every 65-year-old to buy into a risk pool at the cost of £8,000 or so, insuring them against the catastrophic costs of admission to residential care. It delivers on Tony Blair's promise in 1997 to stop people having to sell their homes to pay for their long-term care; last year, 45,000 people had to do just that. These people probably did not grow up with parents who owned property but have been enabled to get on to the property ladder, many in the 1980s, and who could have given their children and grandchildren a start in life that they themselves could never have dreamed of. Instead, once again, the Government have got rid of a driver of social mobility. Of course, the policy will be attractive only to those who would otherwise fail the means test; it is right that those with assets under £23,000 should continue to be supported by the taxpayer.

This is not the time for a litany of failure on social care—the point is made by the gap between Tony Blair's 1997 pledge and this Bill, which shows only the first glimmer of full-scale reform. So much for the demand made, not least by Conservative Members, that truth be given to the aspiration allegedly contained in the Green Paper. In the last general debate, the Secretary of State spoke of his desire to create "unstoppable momentum" for reform. It is a somewhat plaintive cry as he positions himself, I would argue, for the future and his campaign for the Labour leadership. We wish him well; he would be a great asset to us. If he truly wants to create that momentum, he will work with us, not against us. Despite his confession to me, some months ago, that he is tribal at heart, I hope that he can none the less see a way to working with us. A beginning would be to give the Bill due time in Committee, not just a day on the Floor of the House. Of course we must and will divide the House to oppose the programme motion, while not opposing Second Reading. As I have said and as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire said in his opening speech, the Bill contains some worthwhile provisions but should be set in an overall architecture, rather than the Government taking this spatchcock approach to legislation.

My favourite part of the regulatory impact assessment is paragraph 5.29, which notes the risk that

"current research and evidence available does not accurately estimate the true numbers who may come forth to seek assessment and services."

The archaism "come forth" suggests a draftsman who sees the policy for what it is, but it also gives us some ground for optimism—those are, after all, the words that brought Lazarus from the grave. I hope that if Ministers are willing, we can resurrect social care reform across the whole spectrum of care in this Parliament rather than be forced to wait for the next, when the House can be assured that if given the chance, we will act.

9.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): The question of how we create a fairer, more affordable system of care and support is one of the defining issues of our day. From my visits to people being looked after in their own homes and my meetings with carers, I know how much it matters to individuals, families and communities. It is a subject that deserves serious, non-partisan discussion in the House. We have had many contributions worthy of it, and I welcome the forewarning that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) gave me before the Committee stage in the new year, with his detailed questions about the impact assessment. I look forward to debating them further in due course.

Apart from the final contribution by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), we have had a welcome absence of scaremongering or political point scoring. At the start of the debate, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State laid out the challenge ahead and explained how the changes to our society in demography, life expectancy and better medical treatment spell out the need for decisive action on social care.

We know the salient facts. This is a country with more pensioners than people under the age of 16. The Office for National Statistics suggests that by 2033 the number of people aged over 85 will rise from 1.3 million to 3.3 million and the ratio of working-age adults to pensioners—the so-called dependency ratio—will drop below three. By 2050, it will fall to the point at which there will be only two working adults for every pensioner. The facts speak volumes about the need for bold and far-reaching reform. The message is stark: without radical action, our ability to meet the needs of our ageing population will decrease, and the unfairness that we already see across the care system will mount year on year.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble), who said that there had been a transformation in social care over the past few years. That was in stark contrast to the views of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, who opened his remarks by criticising the lack of action. He neglected to tell the House about the 50 per cent. real-terms spending increase on adult social services since 1997, or the £500 million grant given to councils in the past three years to help personalise social care services and pursue the personalisation agenda that many Opposition Members reminded us about. He neglected to mention our efforts through the national dementia strategy, which I had the privilege of launching earlier this year, or the ministerial research group that I launched following the national summit to ensure that more resources go into researching the causes of and cures for dementia and the care of people with it.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention the work under way through the carers strategy to support the friends and families who make such an important contribution to our society, the existence of 11,000 dignity champions throughout our health and social care system, or the fact that the Care Quality Commission report on care and council performance published earlier this month showed that 80 per cent. of homes and agencies and 95 per cent. of councils were rated as "good" or "excellent". Opposition Front Benchers completely ignored and overlooked all that progress.

Despite the progress, we know that the structural changes in our society call for wholesale reform of our care system. That is why our proposal to create a national care service, which many Opposition Members have lauded and applauded so much this evening, is so important. I am delighted that so many hon. Members have now seen the light and are following Labour's lead in forming a National Care Service for the future, which will be fairer, simpler and more affordable, underpinned by national rights and clear entitlements, driven by quality and built around the individual's needs.

Many hon. Members discussed the importance of improving quality. Let me remind the House of what we are doing on raising skills in the work force—another issue that has been debated this evening. For example, we have created a National Skills Academy for Social Care, driving forward training, development and career progression for the adult social care work force. Our social work taskforce sets out how we further support the social work profession. We are doing more to attract young people into the care work force, not least under our "Care First" career scheme, which was launched earlier this year, and by creating an extra 1,000 apprenticeships opportunities.

We are also ensuring that a clear and wide range of interventions are available. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire was highly critical, but he forgot about "Putting People First" and the £60 million we made available to local authorities to encourage investment in telecare and supportive mechanisms to help people in their own homes. Our recent publication on the use of resources further promotes the use of such early interventions and preventive responses. Therefore, to suggest that there has not been a period of investment, reform and change over the past 10 years is to deny and ignore completely what has happened; and frankly, it will leave those who have done so much work on the ground feeling that the Conservatives do not know or care about their work.

The Bill is part of that journey and an important bridge to a National Care Service. Let me set out clearly what it stands for. First and foremost, it represents action now for 280,000 people with the highest level of need—those with advance dementia and Parkinson's disease. It will remove the unfair burden of cost on those people and their families. My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) made a heartfelt plea, based not least on her experience of working with people with dementia, for more help now to prevent the unnecessary admission of people with advanced dementia to hospital. *[Interruption.]* I share her concern about

[Phil Hope]

that, yet for five hours, Tory Members have found reason after reason for not going ahead with the Bill. We have heard them say, "It's only a part of the jigsaw, so do nothing"—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: May I just interrupt the Minister of State for a moment? There are a lot of private conversations taking place on both sides of the Chamber, including on the Government Front Bench. The consequence is that the oration of the Minister of State is not receiving the close attention that he will think it deserves.

Phil Hope: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Conservatives said that it is only a part of the jigsaw, so do nothing—those were the words of the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Chloe Smith). They say, "It is political posturing in front of an election, so do nothing. We need a bigger reform, so don't do this one. It will cost too much given our cuts policies for the next few years, so do nothing." We understand the Conservative position on the Bill: it is to do nothing for someone requiring 17 hours of personal care a week or intimate care, including help with eating, drinking, washing, dressing and toileting, who could be paying about £13,000 a year out of their savings. They would not get any help with that because the Tory party would do nothing.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way in the midst of the non-partisan discussion he said he was going to have this evening, but when is he actually going to reply to the debate? For example, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) talked about advanced dementia. I was in a dementia ward last week—*[Interruption.]* That is not very funny. I was in a dementia ward last week and was told of a patient who had been discharged home to die and did not have access to NHS continuing care. The hon. Gentleman made a valid point. When there is serious advanced dementia, why is NHS continuing care not meeting that need, rather than having someone depend on personal care under the Bill?

Phil Hope: We have not got the time to get into the details of what happens if somebody has continuing needs with dementia. They have both health needs and care needs. The point that the hon. Gentleman has made about the Bill is clear—those on the Tory Benches would do nothing. They suggest that we would not provide the care at home in cases of advanced dementia that we all know is needed.

Mr. Ellwood *rose*—

Phil Hope: I am not going to give way, because I want to address the point made by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and answer some of the other points that he and his hon. Friends made in saying that under the Bill, such care would be free.

I regret that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) does not share our concern about families who have had to run down their savings and now face high costs because of high needs. The people who will benefit from this Bill mostly do not have high incomes relative to the population as a whole. It is the cost of care for those people that would be met, and it would be driven through personal budgets—a key issue that many hon. Members raised—so that they get real choice and real control over the kind of services they need to live their lives as they want to.

Many hon. Members also supported the principle of reablement support to help lift another 130,000 people at a low point in their lives, perhaps after a bereavement, a fall or a period in hospital. Reablement will help people to regain or retain their independence. The Bill will help us to drive forward a process to provide reablement care not just in a few councils but in every council, so that people will get the physiotherapy and personal support to learn how to perform daily tasks after an illness or injury. They will also get the adaptations to their home to make it wheelchair friendly. We will use new technology and telecare such as alarms and electronic pill dispensers to improve safety. By extending that support to those with lower level needs, we can help to reduce the isolation that can occur and keep these people active. We can prevent people from slipping to the point where more intensive care and support is required.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) raised the question of carers' support needs being met. As part of the user's assessment, there will be an opportunity to consider the carer's needs in designing the care and support package. The carer will also be entitled to ask for a specific care assessment to ensure that their needs are identified. I regret the hon. Member for Eddisbury's claim that this Bill will create more of a burden on carers. It will help to free up financial resources, which can then be spent to alleviate the caring burden.

Questions were raised about discrimination between those in residential care and those being cared for at home. I draw hon. Members' attention to the explanatory notes that accompany the Bill and spell out clearly why the different treatment of people living at home is not discriminatory. In the time I have, I cannot spell out the details, but hon. Members can read the notes.

Caring for the most vulnerable in our society is now quite rightly taking centre stage in our politics. It is an issue that arouses strong feeling, and a challenge that this Government are determined to tackle in the fairest possible way. We have a long way to go to create a National Care Service and to do for social care what the NHS has done for health care—to eradicate the fear and uncertainty that surrounds people with care needs.

We said when we launched the Green Paper that we wanted to build an unstoppable momentum on this issue. Failure to take forward radical reform would compound the unfairness, would mean an inadequate care budget being stretched to breaking point, and would mean more and more people being denied the help they need. I do not want to live in that sort of society—in a dog-eat-dog world where people have to fight tooth and nail to get the care they need. Today's Bill is about turning our backs on that depressing vision and embracing a future in which care is provided on the basis of need, not wealth. Unquestionably, there will be challenges ahead to improve quality, provide guarantees of services and standards and end the lottery in social care. However, today we take a decisive and necessary step forward, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

PERSONAL CARE AT HOME BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

1. That the following provisions shall apply to the Personal Care at Home Bill:

Committal

The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on consideration and Third Reading

2. Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be completed at one day's sitting.

3. Proceedings in Committee and any proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

4. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

5. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee and on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

6. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—*(Mr. Blizzard.)*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 266, Noes 182.

Division No. 23] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gilroy, Linda
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey

Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Stewart, Ian
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Watson, Mr. Tom
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Dave Watts and Steve McCabe

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Conway, Derek
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. [illegible]athan
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Maples, Mr. John
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr. Roger
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Baron and Mr. Philip Dunne

Question accordingly agreed to.

PERSONAL CARE AT HOME BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)).

That it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to any Act arising out of the Personal Care at Home Bill in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided, for the purpose of removing the restriction on the period for which personal care may be provided free of charge to persons living at home.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 15),

That, at this day's sitting, proceedings on the Motion in the name of Ms Harriet Harman relating to Regional Select Committee (London) may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Question agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the motion in the name of Ms Harriet Harman relating to Regional Select Committee (London) and the motion in the name of Sarah McCarthy-Fry relating to Climate Change Levy.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56). That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Climate Change Levy

That the draft Climate Change Levy (Solid Fuel) (Revocation) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 10 November, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Lyn Brown.)*

Question agreed to.

Regional Select Committee (London)

10.18 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Barbara Keeley): I beg to move,

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Andy Slaughter and Mr Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.

On 12 November, 2008, my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House committed to bring proposals to the House to establish a Regional Select Committee for London. The House debated and resolved to set up the Committee on 25 June this year. The motion simply asks the House to agree the names for the Committee. The House has already resolved to establish the Committee, which should now be given the opportunity to meet and to take forward its business. My party has nominated five members who are all respected Members of this House and who will, I believe, do a good job of holding to account the Government's activities in London, so I commend the motion to the House.

10.19 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I intend to challenge the Government's motion, but I think it might be a good idea first to establish, briefly, the Select Committee's purpose, so that we can assess whether its proposed members will be able to do a good job.

In June, when we first discussed this topic on the Floor of the House, the Leader of the House spoke of an accountability gap. I think that many Members—certainly Conservative Members—felt that there was an accountability gap in democracy in Britain, but that it had less to do with the London Committee than with a Prime Minister who refused to call a general election.

The Leader of the House seemed to feel that, although we had a Mayor of London, a London assembly, a Government office for London and a plethora of London Members of Parliament, that was somehow not enough. She clearly feared that some issues, such as Heathrow, might slip through the net and not be debated properly. She clearly also feared that the work of, I think, 41 other Select Committees would not be sufficient, and that we would therefore need a further Select Committee to examine London issues in particular.

That is interesting, because London issues have already been examined by many Select Committees, as is clear from the many Select Committee reports on London that have been produced over the past five years. Leafing through them, I spotted a report on the congestion charge by the Transport Committee, which I understand also recently examined the London underground. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee conducted a special inquiry into the London Olympics. The Education and Skills Committee, when it still existed, looked into skills in London. I am sure that many Members were concerned to read the report of the Home Affairs Committee—

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The motion relates simply to membership of the Committee. It was not intended to lead to a debate on whether the Committee should exist

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

in the first place. The issue before the House is not whether we should have a Committee, but who should be on it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I respond to the point of order, let me say that I am a bit worried about the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). I am concerned about his health. I do not want him to erupt, but I am concerned that he might pop. Anyone would think that some Members had had an exceptionally good dinner.

What I want to say to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore)—*[Interruption.]* Order. Members should want to hear what I am going to say to the hon. Member for Hendon. What I want to say to the hon. Member for Hendon is that he is, of course, correct—that is indeed the thrust and the limit of the motion before us—but, as he knows, I am a person of generous spirit. *[Interruption.]* Order. It is perfectly legitimate for the hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) to make some opening remarks by way of background, and I know that she now intends swiftly to focus on the narrow terms of the motion.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, I did not intend to dwell for too long on some of the other Select Committee reports, which deal with issues such as knife crime.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Before the House can make up its mind about whether individual Members are right for the Select Committee, surely we should know whether they have been on other Select Committees that have dealt with London matters.

Justine Greening: That is a good point. I am sure that investigation would reveal first whether those Members had been on those Select Committees, and secondly whether they had participated. I think that many London Members confronted by this limited group of names will wonder why they have been left out. For example, why should we not have London questions, given that we have Welsh questions and Scottish questions?

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Members listed on the Order Paper have been appointed to an entirely superfluous body which will merely duplicate and triplicate work that is already being done perfectly adequately elsewhere?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Barbara Keeley: It appears to be being suggested that there are restrictions in respect of the names that can be put forward. It is open for Opposition Members to put forward other names, however, and I hope that they do so.

Justine Greening: Another problem is that this is costly. It is a cost that the taxpayer cannot afford, yet many Members who represent London constituencies are excluded. We could have London questions. Many of us would be willing to give that a go. We could all participate in that. We could also have a London annual debate—I understand that we used to have one—in which, again, all Members representing London seats could participate.

Mr. Lee Scott (Ilford, North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not many of our constituents have knocked on our doors saying they want an extra layer of government to be brought in?

Justine Greening: That is right. Throughout the country, people's concern is about not the quantity of government, but the quality.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Although I agree with the hon. Lady on the efficacy of the motion, will she not at least concede that tonight's debate is about who is to serve on this Committee, that the two Members proposed are both exemplary London Members, and that we should vote for them to serve on it?

Justine Greening: No, I do not agree at all, and I shall come on to why I have a problem with the names that the House has been presented with later on—or, rather, very shortly, Mr. Speaker.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Is not the nub of the issue what my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson) said, which is simply that, regardless of who we put on to the Committee, its purpose is to scrutinise regional bodies, but a lot of London's regional bodies report to the Mayor and there is already scrutiny of the Mayor, so this is complete duplication?

Justine Greening: Yes, it is complete duplication, and I think it is worse than that, because we have a London assembly, and this London Select Committee is a direct vote of no confidence—

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Further to your answer to the recent point of order, I note that the hon. Lady has still not got around to talking about the people named on the Order Paper. Surely she should do so straight away.

Mr. Speaker: I feel absolutely confident that the hon. Gentleman is not seeking to do the work of the Chair. I know that he is a very courteous fellow, and that he recognises both what are his responsibilities and what are not. I have noted what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I shall go about the business in a proper manner.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, one of the worst aspects of the motion is that it is a direct vote of no confidence by Ministers and the Government in the London assembly that they set up. Ultimately, as my—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the eloquence of the hon. Lady's flow, but I am afraid that we really cannot go into that matter tonight for the simple reason that it has already been considered and decided by the House. The only matter to be determined tonight in respect of this motion is the list of names of people to be appointed, upon which I know the hon. Lady will now immediately focus.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me such a brilliant introduction to the next part of my remarks, because our final objection to the motion is that, at its heart, it is interfering, and that brings me on to the matter of the Members who are proposed.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am sure that my hon. Friend is about to make a very similar point to this, but the London assembly is deliberately designed to give a clear distribution of representation across the whole of London, so that all London boroughs, whose relationship with the Mayor as the strategic authority is crucial to the delivery of London-wide services, are fairly represented, whereas the list of Members proposed indicates a very tight geographical distribution and—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I shall be charitable to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) by concluding that he merely did not hear my ruling of a few moments ago to the hon. Member for Putney, because if he had heard it, I know that as he is a lawyer and an obedient sort of fellow, he would not have made a disorderly point of the kind that he has just made.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend refers to the fact that one of the problems with this Select Committee is that it does not necessarily have to have Members representing London committees on it, nor does it have to have any kind of composition that reflects London's seats or the London assembly.

Barbara Keeley *rose—*

Justine Greening: I want to make some progress, but I will give way.

Barbara Keeley: I should point out that only London Members have been nominated this evening.

Justine Greening: The Deputy Leader of the House is, of course, right on this occasion, but it is instructive to consider the constituencies that these Members represent and make the comparison with the London assembly members who have been elected by those communities. The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) is not from the same party as the London assembly member for London West Central. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) is not from the same party as the London assembly member that Londoners elected to represent Merton and Wandsworth. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter) is not from the same party as the London assembly member—

Barbara Keeley *rose—*

Justine Greening: I shall give way.

Barbara Keeley: It seems as though the hon. Lady would really like to nominate some Members from her party, and I invite her to do so. If she wants to balance out the list, she should name some names.

Justine Greening: Conservative Members know exactly how to raise London issues in this Chamber. We raise them every day that the House sits, in oral questions, in Westminster Hall debates, in Adjournment debates and whenever else we get the chance—we do not need a London Select Committee in order to hold Ministers to account.

I was talking about the constituencies that these Members represent—I can see that you find that interesting, Mr. Speaker—but I now want to discuss my concerns as to whether these Members have really reflected the wishes of Londoners when they have had the chance to represent them. One cannot help but reflect on our post office closure debate earlier last year. Londoners were extremely concerned and troubled about this matter—*[Interruption.]* I shall tell Labour Members what it has to do with this. Several of these Members actually voted to shut post offices when they had the chance, and I think that many Londoners would be concerned to see the ruling party put them on a Select Committee that is meant to scrutinise London issues on their behalf.

Another major issue of concern to my constituents is Heathrow. Several of the MPs being proposed for membership of this Committee voted to expand the airport when they had the chance to do so. Again, that went against the direct wishes of millions of Londoners—these Londoners voted in the Mayor, who would stand up for them on that issue. We have concerns about whether these MPs truly are the right ones to serve on a London Committee.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): I note that some of those named on the Order Paper are not here tonight. Will my hon. Friend consider—if this were possible in your eyes, Mr. Speaker—tabling a manuscript amendment to nominate the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), for example, who is here and who takes an active interest in proceedings? Obviously he would be better than those, such as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who have not bothered to turn up.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I think that most people would be concerned if the hon. Member for Hendon were on a Select Committee, because his questions might be longer than the actual evidence given to it.

I was looking through the résumés of some of those proposed. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) is in the Chamber tonight. It may be that he is, once again, attending the Pugwash conference—he went to the one in Canada last year. We have some concerns and we are not convinced that this is the right way to go.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) makes a very good point. Would it be in order to table a manuscript amendment that only people attending this debate could serve on the Committee?

Mr. Speaker: I do not want to disappoint the right hon. Gentleman—or perhaps I do—but I fear that rather than responding directly to his observation, I must say that it was not a point of order, as he, as a very experienced Member, knows. It was, however, an interesting point of debate.

Justine Greening: I shall start to conclude my comments, because I know, from talking to them in the Lobby earlier, that many other Members want the chance to express their concerns. Suffice it to say that this just is not good enough. The Select Committee will be in place for the term of this Parliament. It could only be a matter of days, hopefully, but it is more likely to be just a matter of months before this Parliament finishes. Even this Prime Minister will have to call an election eventually. There is simply no time for a Select Committee, even if a full set of members is nominated to serve on it, to conduct any meaningful inquiries.

Barbara Keeley: There has been a lot of support for the work of the parliamentary reform Committee, which had much less time than that.

Justine Greening: I simply do not agree with the Deputy Leader of the House. I think that we need to take these issues case by case. The reality is that this will be another talking shop that costs taxpayers more money at the time that they can least afford it. It will have members who many people outside this House will feel have not, when it came to the crunch on key London issues that mattered to them, had a track record of scrutinising this Government.

Mr. David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about the election, and obviously Boris Johnson was elected as Mayor for London. Is not the concern that the genie of devolved government has got out of the bottle and that that genie is now blue, in the form of Boris Johnson? The problem is that the Government want to put that genie back in the bottle, but they cannot do that and so we have a costly, expensive, waste-of-time exercise in the form of this Committee.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is right, of course. That is the ultimate accountability gap that the Government have a problem with. It is not about accountability between this House and the Mayor, but the fact that Londoners voted for the wrong Mayor from the wrong party, in Ministers' opinion. They need to understand that there is an accountability gap, but that the only way in which it will be closed is if their Prime Minister has the guts finally to call an election and to give not just Londoners but the whole of this country the chance to vote them out and to vote in a Government who will do some work on people's behalf. What we get with this Government is pure private interest.

10.37 pm

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I certainly agree that it is time for a general election, and the Prime Minister should call one rather than trying to do any more in the dying days of this Parliament, so that the country can get on and make the Government accountable.

On the specific issue of the regional Select Committee and its members, it is important to recognise the background. Yet again, the Government, through their majority, are imposing reform and accountability on this House rather than building consensus for that reform. The Government's failure to engage with other parties to build cross-party consensus in introducing regional Committees has undermined the prospect of their being successful and their legitimacy.

It would be a success if the Government withdrew the motion, engaged with the other parties and came forward with proper reforms of accountability that engage the whole House. If there is a Division, the Liberal Democrats will vote against the motion, not specifically because of the proposed members of the Committee, but in protest at the way in which the Government have handled the regional Select Committee process.

10.38 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con): May I say what a great pleasure it is to take part in this debate? These debates about London matter. For many years I have regarded myself as somebody who is from Middlesex rather than London, and I still do so, but I have to respect the fact that London is now something a bit bigger. When considering these Committees—I understand that we are considering who will sit on the London Committee—I want to know the regionality of the proposed members in the context of the historic counties. I am thinking hard about that. The area represented by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), who is present, is probably in the historic county of Middlesex, although I do not know whether she regards it as such. The constituency of the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) is a little more difficult for me; I do not know whether anyone can help me with the regionality of Islington.

Robert Neill: If it is of any assistance to my hon. Friend, I understand that Islington was originally in the historic shrieval county of Middlesex but was subsequently incorporated into the London county council area by a London county council Act back in the 1880s.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I know that the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) will understand when I say that we do not want a dewy-eyed, romantic debate about— *[Interruption.]* Order. The House does not want a dewy-eyed, romantic debate about geography. We are focusing, and I know that he will now focus his remarks not on geographical areas, but upon the particular qualities of the Members proposed for the Committee.

Mr. Randall: I apologise to you profusely, Mr. Speaker. It is a fault of mine to be dewy-eyed from time to time when I think about the glory of Middlesex and when I think of metroland. However, I will move on.

In today's world, sadly, the county shires have gone and we are talking about London boroughs. That is not exactly a forward move, in my opinion, but it has happened. The hon. Member for Islington, North sometimes represents some of the more interesting republics of the world, such as Cuba, but he is a very good Member of the House. I see him on the list of Committee members and think, "That's rather good." He is an interesting choice, because I know a little about how these Committees are selected by those wonderful people called the Whips. I know that you have a great respect for them yourself, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I know that that would have been one of your ambitions had you not been called to higher office. *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that that was his ambition for me, but we will not go further into that.

Mr. Randall: I have many ambitions for you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, because of your high office and despite your being a resident of London, I cannot put forward a manuscript amendment to put you on the Committee.

Mr. McLoughlin: Before my hon. Friend finishes singing the praises of the hon. Member for Islington, North, will he remind the House that, along with the hon. Gentleman, he was one of those who robustly opposed the former Prime Minister regarding his war on Iraq?

Mr. Randall: I hate to bring politics into this debate. My right hon. Friend reminds me of the point that I was making about the hon. Member for Islington, North, who could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as one of the usual suspects or one of the Whips' narks. I therefore regard his appointment as rather interesting and something that I should like to support.

Let me return to the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North, for whom I also have a great deal of respect. Years ago, we sat on the Committee that considered the Bill that became the Greater London Authority Act 1999. What a fantastic Committee that was to serve on, for many happy hours. Sadly, many of the other hon. Members on that Committee have now gone or passed away. The hon. Lady sat through many of those Committee sittings, as is the wont of Government Members who are not able to speak. Perhaps she would speak more on this London Committee; she is a great expert on housing in London. I respect her for that, so hers is a very useful appointment to the Committee.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford)—my wife was born in Eltham—and I have crossed swords on various things. He was on the Transport Committee with me, which was very interesting. I have to say though that we differ about the expansion of Heathrow. As my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said, Heathrow expansion is a very important matter for the whole of London.

I know that the Whips want to do the job properly—we always do. We want to make sure that democracy is seen to be done in the fullest and best way. I looked down the list of members and just when I thought I was getting cynical, just when I began to think that the Committee would be full of people who were for the third runway at Heathrow, I saw the name of the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter). He and I are old friends. Back in '97, he stood against me in a by-election. What a charming man he was—he let me win. I am sure he did so out of the goodness of his heart, and if it comes to a vote I might find it difficult in my heart to say that the man who let me come into this place to serve my Uxbridge constituents might not be allowed to be on the Committee.

Since the hon. Gentleman ceased to be a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Transport, he has been a redoubtable opponent of the third runway. Maybe—just maybe—there is some balance in the list.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I am sure that my hon. Friend comes to the debate with clean hands, but perhaps not dry hands, because behind the scenes he plays a part in the selection process. One of the criticisms we have faced from the Government Benches is that there have been no nominations from the Opposition. Can my hon. Friend tell the House, therefore, how it is that the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling) appears on the list?

Mr. Randall: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point that I would have come to later. Presumably, the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling) has been put on by the Government Whips, and the Committee of Selection has put his name forward. I do not know, but perhaps it is something we should explore. In fact, I see the hon. Gentleman poised like a crouching tiger, so he may want to raise that point.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): It was a novel approach. No Whips were involved. I volunteered.

Mr. Randall: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman—my erstwhile Friend. I wonder whether Members on both sides of the House realise how easy it is to get on one of these Committees. All they have to do is volunteer. I am not sure about our side, because as you know, Mr. Speaker, we are not keen on this Committee, for the reasons my hon. Friend the Member for Putney gave. I do not want to go down that line, but the Committee does seem a complete waste of time.

Mr. Robathan: It does indeed seem a complete waste of time, but it seems likely that the Chairman of the Committee will be paid an extra salary, or is that not the case? If it is the case, should not any Member put forward for the Committee abstain from voting, because there will be a conflict of interest?

Mr. Randall: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. From the look on the faces of those on the Government Benches, I am afraid he is incorrect. The role of Chairman will not be a paid position, and the House welcomes that. My hon. Friend and I go back a long way—

Mr. Robathan: How long?

Mr. Randall: A very long way, but I think he is wrong on this point. Everybody has a right to vote on the motion.

Stephen Hammond: As a relative newcomer to the House, I listened intently to my hon. Friend's words about procedure and about some of the Members who will serve on the Committee. He made the point that Government members of Select Committees usually stay silent. Given that the Committee will be made up of Government appointees and volunteers, will it be a silent Committee?

Mr. Randall: Is it not sad to find such cynicism? As you know as a former member of the Chairmen's Panel, Mr. Speaker, before you reached your great position, it is accepted on Standing Committees that Government members will be quiet, and on a Select Committee

[Mr. Randall]

Government members will do very much as they are told. I cannot see the proposed Committee being any different.

Mr. Pelling: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's sarcasm, but does he not think that if what he describes is how the House conducts its affairs, there is something rotten about this place?

Mr. Randall: Even more cynicism. *[Interruption.]* As an excellent voice behind me says, perhaps that cynicism could be removed by an election, letting the people of this country decide what they want.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): It may be lost on the hon. Gentleman that we have just had an election in this country, and his party lost severely. What part of the new Tory one-party project did the people of Glasgow, North-East misunderstand?

Mr. Randall: Don't you just love the Scots, Mr. Speaker? Marvellous. I could, although I am sure you would tell me off for this—

Jim Sheridan: Answer the question.

Mr. Randall: We have had national elections, European elections and a few others. Remind me where the Labour party came in the European elections.

Hon. Members: Bottom!

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is being led astray, and I know that he would not want to be led astray. He will want to return to the list, with a number of whose members he has dealt, but there are at least one or two whom he has not yet mentioned. He may have further suggestions and he needs to come on to them.

Mr. Randall: I am incredibly grateful to you, Mr. Speaker, as always. I was led astray. I have some Scottish blood in me. When I heard the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan), I thought I must continue the argument, but I will not. I will get back to the point.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Let me help my hon. Friend, who is making an interesting contribution. I came here to vote against the names proposed because I think they are the wrong people for the wrong Committee. He seems to be praising them. Will he give me some arguments so that I can vote against them?

Mr. Randall: I am not here to upset people on the other side of the House. When it comes to general elections, there may be many arguments why the people on the list will not be suitable for re-election, but this debate is not about re-election. This is not about how they have let the country down, how the country is in a very bad way and all the rest of it. This is about serving on a regional Select Committee—a Select Committee that we think is a complete waste of time.

However, Mr. Speaker, you entreated me to mention some other names. One of the things that I would like to ask the Government is why they have omitted some of the stars on their Benches. The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) is a shining example of somebody who could speak endlessly for the Select Committee. I come in on many a Friday, and I am just amazed by his elocution and his ability to talk about not very much. That might make him a very worthy member of the Select Committee.

I have now seen enter the Chamber and sit on the Labour Benches somebody of whom I genuinely want to speak highly. I do not think that it would be fair for me to say—*[Interruption.]* I shall name him, but my hon. Friends should control themselves.

Mr. Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): It's Denis.

Mr. Randall: No. The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), my constituency neighbour, is genuinely free-minded. He is far devolved from me in politics. He is a little to the right of me, I think, and he would not let me join the Campaign group, because he said that I was too left wing. The reason why he has not been suggested for the Committee may not be that he rebels against the Government; it may be that he spends a lot of time doing other things in his constituency and, rather like me, feels that this Regional Select Committee might be a waste of his time.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Randall: Why not?

David T.C. Davies: My hon. Friend just mentioned the importance of the Members listed in the motion working hard in their constituencies. If this Regional Select Committee is set up, it may well, like the Welsh Affairs Committee on which I have the pleasure of serving, spend some of its time on visits abroad, taking Members away from their constituency. Does my hon. Friend think that a good or bad thing?

Mr. Randall: I am absolutely sure that this Select Committee will not venture far. It may not even cross the M25. There are so many issues in London which we Conservatives want to discuss, albeit it in another place and not in this forum, but even the Government, while they are setting up this Committee—

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Randall: Of course.

Mr. Chope: In discussing possible members of the Committee, why did my hon. Friend not refer to the hon. Member for Battersea (Martin Linton)? He has 30 years' experience of what has happened in Wandsworth council—delivering the lowest community charge or council tax in the country.

Mr. Randall: The reason why I did not consider the hon. Gentleman is that he had nothing to do with delivering the lowest council tax, and if he had his way it would be put up.

Mr. Robathan: As we are considering possible members, does my hon. Friend recall that the definition of a cockney used to be that he or she was born within the sound of Bow bells? Can he think of anybody who has experience of bells ringing or bell towers who might add to the experience of the Committee?

Mr. Randall: My hon. Friend leads me up to a line that I shall not go down. I am not a sheep that will be led easily on these matters.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am very glad to hear that the hon. Gentleman is not going to go down that route, and there are two very good reasons why he should not. First, it would of course be constitutionally absurd for him to propose a member of Her Majesty's Government as a member of this Select Committee—*[Interruption.]* That is the position, I am telling the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Richard Ottaway), for his benefit and that of the House. Secondly, the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) should not be proposing for membership of the Committee a Member representing a Lincolnshire constituency.

Mr. Randall: I would agree—

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Randall: I think that I may have to.

Mr. Crabb: If we take the example of the Welsh Affairs Committee, on which, indeed, there are Members who represent constituencies outside the Principality, why could not Members from outside London sit on the London Committee?

Mr. Randall: Well, Mr. Speaker, I have to tell my hon. Friend that the reason nobody from outside London can sit on this Committee is that you, Sir, have spoken, and your word is law. If you, Sir, have made a pronouncement that this regional Select Committee for London shall never, ever have a member who sits outside London, then, whether it is constitutional or not, I would regard it as gospel.

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his helpful confirmation that he will accept the will of the Chair, but I think he really knows that I am gently encouraging him to concentrate on the people he would like to see as members of the Committee and not to spend an enormous amount of time dilating on the reasons why somebody should not be a member of the Committee.

Mr. Randall: I have to say, Mr. Speaker, how genuinely grateful I am for your guidance on these matters. The hour is getting late, and I feel that sometimes somebody like me, who is not used to public speaking, will benefit from your guidance.

Jim Sheridan: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You have been a great advocate of trying to modernise this House and make it relevant to the people outside and the people inside. The behaviour of the official Opposition tonight is disgraceful. The public schoolboy attitude of Conservative Members demonstrates their insincerity. Every Thursday, you and I hear the shadow Leader of the House complaining about the lack of time for parliamentary debates. The way they are behaving tonight is an absolute disgrace—they are purely filibustering and trying to waste time, and the general public will see them for what they are.

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Would that I could describe that as a point of order; I am not sure that it quite qualifies for that description. However, he has registered his views with great force, and they are now firmly on the record.

Mr. McLoughlin: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I draw your attention to the motion in the name of the Prime Minister at the top of page 377 of the Order Paper? If the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan) feels that this is abuse, should he not have voted against what was moved in the name of the Prime Minister at 10 o'clock?

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a very old hand—if memory serves me correctly, he has now served in this House for 23 years and either seven or eight months—so he knows very well that in making that point with his characteristic force he has made a very good debating point but not a point of order.

Mr. Randall: It is wonderful to hear your words, Mr. Speaker, because they are the voice of reason.

The interesting point made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North is that it would have been fantastic if we could have had this debate before 10 o'clock. In fact, there are many opportunities where we do not vote and could have had this debate. As my right hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), who is second only to you, Mr. Speaker, in my esteem on these matters—*[Interruption.]* I am choosing my words very carefully. As my right hon. Friend said, there were opportunities to do this at another hour. I regret this situation, because I want to get back home to Uxbridge—in Middlesex, and still in London—but I feel so strongly that we must debate the matter that I will continue.

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my dismay at the omission from the Committee of the witty repartee of the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Stephen Pound), who could bring to it the experience of living in a Conservative borough that this Christmas is giving £50 back to its residents?

Mr. Randall: If I allow myself to go back to the heady days of the debates on the Greater London Authority Act 1999, I remember that there we were sitting there one evening, late into the night. The hon. Member for Ealing, North who, as my hon. Friend says, is a very witty Member, said that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Richard Ottaway) resembled a giraffe. I did not know what that had to do with anything, but I found out later that the hon. Gentleman

[Mr. Randall]

was on a wager to mention the word "giraffe" in a speech. I tried to think what he himself reminded me of in the way of animals of the savannah, and all I could think of was a dik-dik, which is a small antelope.

The point that I am making, which I think is valid, is that if we are to have a Select Committee—*[Interruption.]* I say to the hon. Member for somewhere north of Watford that I do not interfere in the matters of the Scottish Affairs Committee. If the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North wants to go home, he should go home. I am not forcing him to stay here. If he wants to discuss London, he should stay here; if he wants to go home to Scotland, good luck to him. Now, we should return to the important subject—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Yes, I am very happy, indeed extremely eager, that the hon. Gentleman should return to the terms of the motion. Without wanting in any way to be personal about it, may I entreat him to focus on the overall qualities of possible members of the Committee? I do not think it is seemly or appropriate for him to dilate on the physical characteristics of either the hon. Member for Croydon, South or the hon. Member for Ealing, North.

Mr. Randall: I will bear that in mind, but I have to say that I was not actually referring to any physical proportion; I was actually talking about their spirituality. If you understood the dik-dik, which is a sly creature, alert in the undergrowth just waiting to be predated, you might find that. However, I get the general drift that we have to move on a little. We have only just started on west London.

Mr. Greg Knight: My hon. Friend gave the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan) some advice a moment ago, telling him that he could go home. Is that advice available to those in all parts of the House?

Mr. Randall: You will know, Mr. Speaker, that it is not within my power to keep anybody here. All I know is that the Order Paper states:

"Debate may continue until any hour, if the 10.00 pm Business of the House motion is agreed to."

I believe it was. Perhaps, given modernisation, we should consider whether we can come back tomorrow and vote on the motion. I did not realise that I was going to speak on this—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am listening with the closest interest and respect to what the hon. Gentleman is saying, as he would anticipate, but may I say to him that although, as he rightly states, it is noted on the Order Paper that the debate "may" run until any hour, there is a difference between that and "shall" run until any hour?

Mr. Randall: I do not really understand what "any hour" means in this sense, Mr. Speaker. Whether it is "may" or "shall", "any hour" could mean any particular time. We recognise that the House is a place for debate. I am sorry that it has come to this so late.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): May I take my hon. Friend back to about 15 minutes into his oratory, when he talked about the suitability of particular locations for members of the Committee? Much to my chagrin, St. Albans has been designated part of the north London arc. I disagree with being part of it, because we think we are in Hertfordshire, but I completely agree that perhaps we have not looked at the right mix for the Committee.

Mr. Randall: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, because a Regional Select Committee for London will have to address Crossrail, for example, and transport in a wider aspect. Many who commute into London do not live within London's boundaries. Therefore, it might be appropriate for those who commute from outside London to be members of the Committee.

While we are talking about Crossrail, which I am, I wonder how many hon. Members named in the motion will be affected by it. Some will be, and it is good that they will be represented, but there is also the question of London underground, which is a very important matter to my constituents—I mentioned Heathrow earlier, but the underground is also important. I am looking through the list here, and I am not too sure how many of the hon. Members on it have underground stations in their constituencies, although rather peculiarly, even if they do, someone else might say, "What about the overground?" because there might be a bias for underground.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend will recognise that overground transport is a key issue in London. The London borough of Bromley, which I happen to represent, has something like 23 overground railway stations, but not a single Member whose constituency is on the overground has been proposed to sit on the Committee. The same applies to a number of other London boroughs. Should we not perhaps rehearse the number of London boroughs that have overground stations only, and not underground stations—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman asks whether that matter should be rehearsed. The clear and explicit answer is no.

Mr. Randall: Once again, Mr. Speaker, I am so grateful to you, because sometimes there is a temptation to go down the wrong line—I do not mean underground line.

Stephen Hammond *rose—*

Mr. Randall: I will give way to someone else from south of the river.

Stephen Hammond: It is a great place to come from, but one proposed member of the Committee who comes from south of the river is not here this evening. Mr. Speaker, you entreated my hon. Friend to talk about some of the qualities that the candidates will need. One is scrutiny. Does my hon. Friend want to compare and contrast the qualities of the proposed Members against the Greater London authority members who are already going to fulfil that function for us?

Mr. Randall: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. I am not sure that I am able in any way to go down that line.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): My hon. Friend says he thinks the Select Committee should talk about issues such as Crossrail, but people in my constituency think that an awful lot of money is spent on transport in the south-east and that we in Yorkshire do not get our fair share. Surely if the Committee is going to talk about very expensive projects such as Crossrail, there should be a Yorkshire perspective on it—I hasten to add that I am not volunteering.

Mr. Randall: Perhaps I was a little harsh with the hon. Gentleman opposite from Scotland. Therefore, much as I would like to agree with my hon. Friend, if I was harsh with the hon. Gentleman, I have to be harsh with him, because this is a London or south-east matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) asked me—

Jim Sheridan: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I just point out that I am not the Member for Scotland? I am the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North. I must say that the anti-Scottishness coming from the Opposition demonstrates why there will never be a Conservative MP in Scotland.

Mr. Speaker: That is a point of information and debate.

Mr. Randall: I do not know why the hon. Gentleman is so excited. I know it is late and that he wants to go home, but in fact, as I was saying, I have a lot of Scottish blood flowing through my veins.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): Like the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan), I am a Scot, and proudly so. May I say that my hon. Friend has shown me nothing but kindness during my years in this House? However, speaking on behalf of my constituents in Surrey Heath in this United Kingdom Parliament, may I draw his attention to the fact that my constituents, who depend on South West Trains, would like to see two particular Labour Members on the Committee, namely the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson), because Eurostar has moved from Waterloo and now terminates in his constituency, and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), because Waterloo, Clapham Junction and Vauxhall are the three stations whose pointing and track systems have a direct effect on the speed with which my constituents can travel from Camberley, Frimley, Bagshot, Ash Vale, Farnborough Main and Farnborough North Camp—

Mr. Speaker: Order. We have the general drift of the point.

Mr. Randall: I thank my hon. Friend for assuring the House that I have no feelings of antipathy towards Scotland. In fact, I admire the Scots. In many respects, and speaking as a retailer, I wish that I had been Scottish myself as I would like to uphold many of their qualities.

Mr. Pelling: I am enjoying the best after-dinner speech that I have heard all year. Is not the solution to the hon. Gentleman's concern about the quality of rail services in London for Conservative Members to do the work that they are paid for and to sit on this Committee?

Mr. Randall: When I first came into this House, there was no Greater London assembly or Mayor for London. Therefore, in 1997, the hon. Gentleman's words would have been correct. Unfortunately for him, today there are many elected members representing our boroughs in London, and therefore his point is not that well made.

On the other hand, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) makes an extremely good point. I had almost forgotten about the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson). For many years, I was a voter in that constituency as a student. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman was standing then, otherwise I might have had to consider my vote. We bearded chaps have to stick together. It is true that he would be a sane voice.

One of the things that I find fascinating about this place—I am sure that you have observed it from your position, Mr. Speaker—is that those people on the way up sometimes do not speak as forthrightly as they do once they have been up and are on the way down. Therefore, I find that the people to whom we should listen most in this House are those who have been there, done it and do not want any more preferment. Suddenly, their words have even more credence. I know the right hon. Gentleman to be a fine Member of Parliament.

Mr. Burrowes: Does my hon. Friend think that those hon. Members suggested for the Committee are on their way up or on their way down?

Mr. Randall: If my hon. Friend asks about our hon. Friends, I might give him an opinion, but I will not speak for the Government Benches—

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Nicholas Brown): On a point of order, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman. He will not speak for the Government, but I will. I beg to move that the question be now put—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not require any help from the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Richard Ottaway). For the avoidance of doubt, I can tell hon. Members that when appointments to other Select Committees are contested, Standing Order No. 15(1)(c) provides for a debate for up to one hour before the question is put. That is the conclusive response to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Nicholas Brown *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 211, Noes 131.

Division No. 24] **[11.19 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Anderson, Mr. David
Ainger, Nick	Atkins, Charlotte
Allen, Mr. Graham	Austin, Ian

Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Chapman, Ben
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Farrelly, Paul
Fiello, Mr. Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gilroy, Linda
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hope, Phil
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Jackson, Glenda
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Morgan, Julie
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Christine
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Stewart, Ian
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Watson, Mr. Tom
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Dave Watts and Steve McCabe

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Angela
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Huhne, Chris
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Kawczynski, Daniel
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver

Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Loughton, Tim
Main, Anne
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Sir Robert
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Stanley, rh Sir John
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mr. Roger
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Mr. Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Baron and
Mr. Philip Dunne

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put accordingly,

That Ms Karen Buck, Jeremy Corbyn, Clive Efford, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr Andy Slaughter and Mr Andrew Pelling be members of the London Regional Select Committee.

The House divided: Ayes 212, Noes 124.

Division No. 25] **[11.36 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Mr. Graham
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Bain, Mr. William
Banks, Gordon
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, rh Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Chapman, Ben
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gilroy, Linda
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hope, Phil
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Jackson, Glenda
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, rh Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Linton, Martin
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Morgan, Julie
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, rh Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Christine
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, rh Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek

Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Watson, Mr. Tom
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Dave Watts and Steve McCabe

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Angela
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Huhne, Chris
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Kawczynski, Daniel
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Loughton, Tim
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Sir Robert
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, rh Sir John
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mr. Roger
Wright, Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Baron and Mr. Philip Dunne

Question accordingly agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made,

That the Major Accident Off-Site Emergency Plan (Management of Waste from Extractive Industries) (England and Wales) Regulations 2009 (S.I., 2009, No. 1927), dated 16 July 2009, be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—*(Helen Jones.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

Ordered,

That the Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Conditional Cautions: Financial Penalties) Order 2009 (S.I., 2009, No. 2773), dated 15 October 2009, be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—*(Helen Jones.)*

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—*(Helen Jones.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Ms Karen Buck be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Mr Khalid Mahmood be added.—*(Mr. McAvoy, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

PETITIONS

Badman Report (Newark)

11.47 pm

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 25 of my constituents who

are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials.

They also

believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence,

failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Newark parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000498]

Badman Report (Romford)

11.48 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): In the same vein as my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer), on behalf of the constituents of Romford, I would like to present a petition of no fewer than the names of 14 parents who are deeply concerned about the recommendations of the Badman report and the possible detrimental changes to home education. I urge the Government to rethink their policy on this.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Romford parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000622]

Equitable Life (West Dorset)

11.49 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Although I tabled the early-day motion on the Badman report, I rise to present a petition on behalf of constituents of mine who are concerned about the Equitable Life saga and, in particular, the failure of Her Majesty's Government to fulfil, in full, the recommendations of the ombudsman. That subject has been much debated in this House.

The petition states:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying—

in full—

with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

Following is the full text of the petition.

[The Petition of residents of the constituency of West Dorset,

Declares that the Petitioners either are or they represent or support members, former members or personal representatives of deceased members of the Equitable Life Assurance Society who have suffered maladministration leading to injustice, as found by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in her report upon Equitable Life, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 16 July 2008 and bearing reference number HC 815; and further declares that the Petitioners or those whom they represent or support have suffered regulatory failure on the part of the public bodies responsible from the year 1992 onwards, but have not received compensation for the resulting losses and outrage.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000454]

Badman Report (Castle Point)

11.50 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I believe that the state does not always know better than the parents how they should bring up and educate their children. I am, therefore, delighted to present this petition on the Badman report, which has been signed by a number of my very caring and well-informed constituents. They are right to be concerned.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Castle Point parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory

[Bob Spink]

annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000628]

Freedom of Information Requests

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Helen Jones.)*

11.50 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): I am very grateful for this opportunity to raise the issue of the processing of freedom of information requests. This concerns the Information Commissioner and how freedom of information requests are dealt with, and it is a very sorry tale. The Information Commissioner enforces and oversees the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act, the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003. The span of responsibilities is very wide, but the Information Commissioner's office is simply not coping. There are big issues to address in respect of how the Information Commissioner's office is staffed, managed and resourced. Curiously, its funding comes from the Ministry of Justice, which also provides advice to all Departments on freedom of information cases and issues.

The Information Commissioner's office has a huge backlog of hundreds of cases, which go back to 2005. I have in my hand a copy of the "case load snapshot" that the Information Commissioner published in September. It runs to about 30 closely typed pages, and about 30 to 40 cases are listed on each page. The system is just gumming up. Some of the requests seem fairly trivial. For example, information was requested about the names of individuals holding parliamentary passes from the Association of Former Members of Parliament and the Industry and Parliament Trust; that request goes back 16 months. A request relating to the use of pseudonyms by the Cabinet Office dates back 15 months; another, relating to the royalties paid to the estate of the composer of "Sailing By" on Radio 4 dates back a year. And so the list goes on, page after page.

I raised this issue in the summer Adjournment debate on 21 July, when I referred to the director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, Maurice Frankel, who had just written a piece in *The Guardian*, which said that the Freedom of Information Act is "toothless". He complained about the backlog of cases and the budget shortfall, saying that all that was making the Act toothless. He said that

"on average it takes eight months before an investigation into a complaint even begins. More than a quarter of cases wait for over a year"—

just to get started. He went on to say that

"46 per cent. of cases took between 1 and 2 years from complaint to decision notice",

and that an astonishing quarter of all cases

"took between 2 and 3 years to"

reach a decision.

How on earth did we find ourselves in this situation? I ask that because there is a memorandum of understanding between the Government and the Information Commissioner—I suppose one could call it a protocol. It specifies how long it should take to deal with freedom of information requests. It states that the Government Department concerned should

"provide all relevant information...as quickly as possible and in any event within 20 working days".

If the Department is asked for additional information, that should be provided

"within 10 working days of it being requested".

That is the theory, but the fact is that these deadlines are not being met.

If the Information Commissioner believes that a Government Department is withholding information, he can serve an information notice and the Department or public authority is obliged to comply. However, the commissioner has been very dilatory in issuing these information notices. Very few have been lodged with the Cabinet Office, and I found out only a few days ago that no information notice was issued in response to delays in coming forward with information that I had requested about the noble Lord Ashcroft. My own request is listed in the snapshot I have here and is dated 4 April 2008, 20 months ago. I requested information about Lord Ashcroft, his UK residency and his subsequent elevation to the House of Lords.

I say all this in parenthesis, but we know that the story goes back nine years to when Michael Ashcroft was elevated to the House of Lords. He gave an explicit undertaking at that time that he would bring his tax affairs onshore. When he was considered for his life peerage on the recommendation of the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the then Leader of the Conservative Opposition, No. 10 Downing street issued a statement in March 2000, which said:

"In order to meet the requirements for a Working Peer, Mr Michael Ashcroft has given his clear and unequivocal assurance that he will take up permanent residence in the United Kingdom…before the end of the calendar year."

That is, he would become a UK resident for tax purposes. The undertaking was endorsed by the Member for Richmond, Yorks, the then leader of the Conservative party. Nine years down the line, we still do not know if Lord Ashcroft is a permanent resident for tax purposes.

In a sense, I anticipated all this—sometimes I can see the future. Two years ago, I introduced my Disqualification from Parliament (Taxation Status) Bill. It received a Second Reading on 28 January 2008 but ran out of time and did not get into Committee. I have to say that the Government, at that stage, were sympathetic. Now we find ourselves in the Alice in Wonderland situation where the Leader of the Opposition wants to introduce legislation to require all Members of Parliament—Commons and Lords—to be UK taxpayers, yet only a few days ago, on 7 December, he said that the tax affairs of Members of the House of Lords were private matters for them. Now he has changed his mind. We know about Zac Goldsmith and so on, so I need not go into that; but until Zac Goldsmith I thought it inconceivable that someone who was non-domiciled would seek to be a Member of this House of Commons.

My Government's position on this is very disappointing. I tabled a parliamentary question a week or so ago, asking them to amend their own Bill—the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill—to exclude from membership all those who were non-domiciled. Although the Government said that they agreed with the idea, they would not table an amendment to that effect. That disappoints me. If and when the Liberal Democrats table their amendment, I shall support it. I shall table one myself, and if it is selected I shall ask my friends on the Government Benches to vote for it. It is a mystery to me why the Government are taking that position.

I shall not go through the chronology of the 20 months in which my request was in the system, but I will say that I first raised this matter with the Cabinet Secretary in November 2007. I wanted to know two simple facts—the nature of the undertaking that was given by Michael Ashcroft and to whom it was given. I was told by the Cabinet Secretary that I could not have that information because, first, it was exempted under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 because it related to the conferring by the Crown of an honour or dignity; and secondly, because information would have been given in confidence and that confidence had to be protected. So, my request was turned down. I subsequently appealed to the permanent secretary for Government communication at the Cabinet Office, and my appeal was rejected. I find that difficult to take, because I believe that if someone is placed in the legislature and if they vote and speak on matters that come before the House of Lords, they should be a UK taxpayer. If there is any doubt about whether a person is a UK taxpayer, there is a public interest in disclosure and that public interest is sufficient to override any obligation of confidence.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, in the United States every person who stands for election has to make a financial disclosure. Does he agree that what is good enough for the US is good enough for the UK?

Mr. Prentice: I agree. It is astonishing that we in the UK Parliament tax our fellow citizens but might not be taxpayers ourselves.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman has now been in parenthesis for about seven minutes. This debate, on his chosen title, is about the processing of freedom of information requests. He cannot use it to make a personal attack on a Member of the other place.

Mr. Prentice: I would not dream of launching a personal attack on another Member of Parliament, whether elected or unelected. I was simply setting the context. I was going to run through the chronology of this affair, including the e-mails that have travelled between me and the staff of the Information Commissioner's office. In some of that correspondence, I was told that I would get the information in two, three or four weeks' time, or that the information was just around the corner and that I was to bear with the office, because it almost had the information. I have the chronology here, but I would not embarrass the individuals concerned. I would give them different names, because they are not responsible for the situation in which they found themselves. It is the people at the top, who are running the Information Commissioner's office, who have mismanaged things. They have mismanaged staff or have not made the right decisions to ensure that when people ask the commissioner for help, they get it in a timely fashion. It is unacceptable to wait for years to get decision notices on matters of great import. The matter that I have been talking about, in parenthesis, is one of huge import.

Let me wind the reel forward to this month, when it became known that Mr. Speaker had granted me this Adjournment debate. I discovered at the beginning of the month that the staff member who had been dealing with my freedom of information request was a temporary

[Mr. Gordon Prentice]

secondee from the Ministry of Justice, and that he had gone back to the Ministry without my case having been resolved. Then the penny dropped. I was about to have an Adjournment debate; I could name names and I had the chronology. On Friday, I received a letter from the Information Commissioner, Christopher Graham—who has not been long in post; about six months. His letter is conciliatory. He tells me that "the state of affairs" in the Information Commissioner's office is

"admittedly unsatisfactory, but there is good evidence that the situation is being turned around, albeit slowly".

He also tells me that he will be more robust in issuing information notices that would force recalcitrant Departments and other authorities to act.

That is a good thing, but the thing that really warmed my heart—if you will allow me to say this, Mr. Deputy Speaker—was that the Information Commissioner has as good as promised that there will be a decision about the Lord Ashcroft request by the end of January. He says:

"I understand that you are frustrated by the delays at the ICO and have been pressing the new case officer, recently allocated to the case, for an indication as to when the Decision Notice might be issued. This looks likely to be sometime in the New Year. I hope this can be achieved before the end of January but the new case officer has had to seek further information"

Can you get this? Further information—

"from the Cabinet Office in order to complete his investigation."

After 20 months, he is seeking further information. In the long run we are all dead. In six months' time I may no longer be a Member of Parliament—the odds are that I will not be—yet the issue drags on interminably. However, the letter gives me some hope.

What do I want? The Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), who chairs the Justice Committee, is in the Chamber. The Committee held a pre-appointment confirmation hearing when Christopher Graham was appointed, and at the time it and Mr. Graham acknowledged that there was a backlog that had to be tackled. I want the Committee to bring Mr. Graham before it to quiz him about the delays, and I have written to the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed about that. I hope the Committee responds expeditiously to my request.

The second thing I want is no further slippage in the timetable for responding to my freedom of information request about Lord Ashcroft. I really do want the matter settled next month.

Thirdly, and finally, I want my own Government to table amendments to their own Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill to ban non-domiciled persons from Parliament. If the Government do not do that, other people will.

12.8 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Mr. Michael Wills): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on securing the debate and on raising some important points, which he did with his customary vigour.

I understand and share his views on the importance of freedom of information and its implementation. This is not a sorry tale, as my hon. Friend suggested, but something of which the Government are extremely proud. We brought in the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and overall there is no question but that the legislation has been successful in enabling the public better to understand and engage with public authorities. I have huge respect for Maurice Frankel, but one point—the quote given by my hon. Friend that the legislation was toothless—is manifestly not the case. Of all places in the United Kingdom, the House is the last place that would regard freedom of information as toothless.

That is not to say that there are not real problems with implementation, and my hon. Friend has rightly drawn attention to them. We are deeply conscious of them in Government. It is worth putting them in context. The new legislation is radical and as always with such matters, it has taken time to bed down. It is not as if anyone has been insouciant or careless about the problems that my hon. Friend described.

It is worth remembering that the freedom of information legislation gave the right to request official information from a huge range of public authorities, including all central Government Departments. It has provided unprecedented access to information held by more than 100,000 public authorities. As a result, a range of previously inaccessible information has entered the public domain.

Inevitably, that will pose challenges to all those public authorities and to the Information Commissioner's Office. My hon. Friend is right. We must be vigilant and we must respond to the challenges. The Government, the Department and I as the Minister responsible for freedom of information are all working consistently and constantly with the Information Commissioner's Office to meet those challenges, including the backlog of cases.

Of course my hon. Friend is right. It is unacceptable that the backlog should continue. We are giving the Information Commissioner's Office more money. For the present financial year, the Government have given a further £500,000 of funding for the ICO, in addition to the baseline funding of £5 million. That has taken place in an extremely challenging economic context. I hope that my hon. Friend will accept that that demonstrates our commitment to making sure that the radical legislation delivers as it was meant to. Central Government also provided the ICO with additional funding above its baseline amounting to £1.3 million between 2005 and 2008.

The additional funding is complemented by the secondment of Whitehall staff to the ICO, as my hon. Friend mentioned. That is an attempt to improve the performance of the Information Commissioner's Office. It also gives Whitehall officials a chance to experience what that is like, so they bring that knowledge back to their Departments. I hope that that will improve the performance of those Departments in responding to freedom of information requests.

My hon. Friend insinuated that the delay may have been because the secondee who was dealing with his request came from the Ministry of Justice. He is wrong. There is no question but that central Government officials who are seconded to the ICO are impartial. My hon. Friend may wish to note that all casework undertaken at the Information Commissioner's Office, including the issuing of information notices and decision notices, is supervised by permanent staff. Decision notices are signed off by senior management, often the Deputy Commissioner or assistant commissioners. I hope that will reassure my hon. Friend that there is nothing untoward about this. It is, nevertheless, a problem.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, there is a new Information Commissioner, Christopher Graham, who has been in post for about six months. He has said that he wants to

"put a shock through the . . . system",

and that the clearance of the unacceptable backlog is one of his top priorities. He has also said that he wants to clear the majority of the backlog by January, and he has put in place a number of measures to deliver on that. He has shown commendable resolve in tackling it.

Christopher Graham has also said that cases will be prioritised, based on the nature of information that is disputed in each case. He is concerned that too many decision notices are produced to a

"gold standard with eleven pages of legal argument that would survive a prolonged case in the European Court of Human Rights",

where often a more concise consideration would do.

I do not think that the system is gumming up, as my hon. Friend suggests. There is a problem, but we have already seen significant improvements. Despite a significant increase in the business of the Information Commissioner this year—freedom of information appeals are up by 29 per cent.—the commissioner is closing cases at a faster rate, 34 per cent. faster in quarter 2 of 2009 compared with quarter 2 of 2008. There has been a reduction in the backlog of cases to 1,166 from 1,491 in April, including a reduction in the number of cases more than a year old from 436 to 278, which is a 36 per cent. drop in eight months. There is still a long way to go. My hon. Friend is right to raise the matter, but I hope that he will accept that the system is far from gumming up. We are beginning to see real improvements.

Clearly, if the Information Commissioner is to make the progress that we all want him to make, he will require co-operation from Departments and other public bodies. They do have to respond in a timely fashion, and the Government are responding to that challenge. We have communicated throughout Whitehall the need to work closely with the commissioner at senior levels in all Departments, and through the better freedom of information programme, which the Ministry of Justice runs, we are sharing best practice to help Departments to deal with requests and complaints more efficiently.

As my hon. Friend said, Departments are expected to respond to correspondence with the Information Commissioner's Office in accordance with the provisions of the memorandum of understanding, which my hon. Friend set out. He may be interested to know that the Ministry of Justice is reviewing the memorandum with the Information Commissioner, and we will of course take into account the issues that my hon. Friend has raised today.

My hon. Friend referred to cases in which delays occur but the nature of the information is straightforward. Sometimes things are not quite as straightforward as they might at first appear, but even complex information must be dealt with quickly and in accordance with the memorandum. I accept that point. In extreme cases, section 77 of the 2000 Act makes it a criminal offence for any public authority or any employee of any public authority to alter, deface, block, erase, destroy or conceal any record to avoid disclosure. That is a strong deterrent to any public authority that might be minded to evade, or to seek to evade, the requirements of the Act.

We have also invited the Information Commissioner to let us know whether he believes that Departments are delaying unduly, so that we can pursue the matter. My hon. Friend is quite right to raise those delays. They are unacceptable, we need to do better and we are doing better. We are moving forward. We are publishing more information proactively, and I am trying to encourage the chief executives of every local authority to publish their performance statistics on meeting freedom of information requests, so that there is greater transparency among local authorities. They are often a source of very important information for people, and that is one of the main benefits of the Act.

We are keen to extend the benefits of the Act further, so we are consulting a number of public bodies with a view to bringing them under the legislation's coverage. Subject to the outcome of that consultation, the Act could cover more public bodies, including UCAS, the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Financial Ombudsman Service and scores of academy trusts.

We set up the Dacre review to review the implementation of the 30-year rule, and the Prime Minister has already announced the Government's intention, in responding to the review, to reduce the 30-year rule to 20 years. That is a significant step, and it will result in more information reaching the public domain sooner than it otherwise would have.

My hon. Friend asked for three things in concluding his remarks. The first two are not a matter for me, and I hope that he will forgive me if I do not comment on specific cases. On the third of his requests, however, I can say to him—I think that he is well aware of this—that the Government's principled position is exactly the same as his: of course people who are not domiciled in this country should not sit in the legislature. That is a clear position of principle. My hon. Friend will be aware that we are bringing forward measures that relate to the House of Lords, so that its Members cannot be non-domiciled and still sit in that Chamber. He will be aware also that we are actively considering how best we can bring in similar measures for this House, so I hope that that provides him with some comfort.

I very much hope that my hon. Friend will get the answers—or at least an answer—that he seeks from the Information Commissioner within the time frame that he has mentioned. I accept that he has waited far too long for an answer. Whatever the answer, he should receive it in a timely fashion, and we are endeavouring to ensure that that takes place. We have a long way to go, but we are making considerable progress, and I hope that that provides some reassurance to my hon. Friend.

Question put and agreed to.

12.19 am

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Tuesday 15 December 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

High Frequency Share Trading

1. **Susan Kramer** (Richmond Park) (LD): If he will make an assessment of the merits of regulating the practice of high frequency share trading; and if he will make a statement. [306840]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): High frequency trading practices and the firms that use them are subject to existing regulation, which includes provisions covering behaviour and market conduct. The Financial Services Authority will take action if those provisions are breached, and it continues to assess the risks from changing market practices, in consultation with other securities regulators.

Susan Kramer: The Minister will be well aware that nanosecond ownership of shares fundamentally changes the relationship between the shareholder and the board of directors, and therefore corporate governance. However, small firms that are, in a sense, not suitable for high frequency share trading will find it more difficult to raise equity capital, and such trading is related to a lot of activity that takes place off the exchanges in so-called dark pools. Does he not think that this at least deserves some detailed scrutiny and review before we walk into another disaster involving instruments that we do not understand?

Ian Pearson: I agree with the hon. Lady that this needs detailed scrutiny and review. She might be aware of the paper that the Treasury issued on Friday entitled "Risk, reward and responsibility: the financial sector and society", which discusses a number of these issues. I am not sure that I agree with her point about liquidity and small companies, because there is evidence that high frequency trading is an important way of ensuring that there is additional liquidity. She will be aware, however, that the Committee of European Securities Regulators will be giving advice to the Commission next year on the review of the markets in financial instruments directive, which will certainly include the issue of high frequency trading and the nature of the changing equity market.

Mr. Speaker: Order. We need to speed up.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): May I ask my hon. Friend about speculative share trading in Cadbury? The City Minister, Lord Myners, said recently that he thought that it had become far too easy for British companies to be taken over. Does my hon. Friend agree, and if so, what can be done in Cadbury's case?

Ian Pearson: I do not think that it would be appropriate to comment on individual cases. The UK has a long-established regime of open markets and a stock market, and all publicly listed companies are for sale; that is the nature of listing. I am confident that Cadbury is a well-run company. It is putting up a strong defence, and it will be up to shareholders to decide how they want to vote and support it.

Budget 2009

2. **Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the economy of the fiscal measures to help businesses he announced in Budget 2009. [306841]

6. **Gordon Banks** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the economy of the fiscal measures to help businesses he announced in Budget 2009. [306847]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Alistair Darling): A substantial amount of targeted support has been provided by the Government to help businesses through the recession.

Derek Twigg: How would a flat tax, as advocated by some Opposition Members, help the recovery?

Mr. Darling: I have never seen the attraction of a flat tax at the best of times. It would mean that people at the top end of the income scale would pay rather less than those at the bottom, and at this time, of all times, there ought to be fairness. Of course, I do not think that a flat tax would help businesses at all. The targeted measures that we are putting in place, such as giving businesses time to pay their tax, allowing them to carry back their losses and the reduction in VAT, are helping—and will help—business.

Gordon Banks: Will my right hon. Friend tell the House the estimated sum that will be retained by small businesses in the UK as a result of freezing the level of small companies' corporation tax?

Mr. Darling: I think that I said in my statement on the pre-Budget report that about 850,000 firms had benefited from that measure. It is important that we do everything we can to help small businesses, because after all, they employ a great number of people and will, hopefully, grow into larger businesses.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Is not the reality that businesses in our constituencies still cannot access the credit that they need, and that all this newly printed money is being siphoned off into purchasing gilts to finance the extra borrowing that is a direct result of the Chancellor's failure to come up with a proper fiscal plan to reduce the deficit?

Mr. Darling: No. I believe that the quantitative easing measures taken by the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England are helping the process of recovery. The hon. Gentleman has a point, however, about bank lending. As I have said before, the stock of lending is broadly similar to what it was before the crisis. In addition, the banks in which we have major shareholdings—RBS and Lloyds—have lent an additional £50 billion. At the same time, however, there has been a repayment of lending by other businesses, which is why the net figure looks so low. As I said last week, it is necessary that the deficit be reduced, and we will halve it over a four-year period once recovery has been established—but it is important to ensure that we get that recovery established.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): This recession is longer and deeper than either of the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. Unemployment and youth unemployment are higher than they were in 1997, so the decision to add an additional national insurance burden for employers seems to make no sense, as it will weaken businesses' ability to create jobs. Does the Chancellor not agree with the chamber of commerce in his home town of Edinburgh that that makes no sense, and that he should have been incentivising job creation, not penalising it?

Mr. Darling: We have introduced a number of measures to help people get into work, and there are 2.5 million more people in work now than there were in 1997. Also, unemployment would have been much higher if we had followed the course of action taken in the 1990s and the 1980s. The measures that we are taking are working, and they are making sure that we are getting people back into work much more quickly than was the case in the past. Most people find work within six months, and many get back into work in a much shorter period. We will continue to do whatever is necessary to maintain jobs. That is important in every part of the country, including Scotland.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): May I report back to the Chancellor the information that I was given yesterday by the Volkswagen training centre in my constituency about the car scrappage scheme? I was told that it had been hugely successful in boosting jobs, particularly in the motor retail sector. The centre's evidence showed that it had been taken up by people who would not have bought cars otherwise, and especially by large numbers of elderly motorists and women. They valued the simplicity of the scrappage scheme and found it very useful.

Mr. Darling: I met one such customer in Manchester last summer—[Hon. Members: "That's two, then!"] On the basis of those two anecdotal pieces of evidence, I am sure that we must be on the right track. Rather more importantly, however, since the Budget last year there have been 290,000 orders for new vehicles. We have made a further £100 million available, and the scheme is an example of how a comparatively small amount of money has helped the confidence in the motor industry, which is a major employer in our country. In addition, Honda has announced that it is switching some production from Japan to this country, and Nissan too has reported an increase in production. This is an example of a policy making a difference to a very important part of our country's industry.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): Businesses need a credible plan from the Government to deal with the fiscal deficit. The universal reaction last week from every single business organisation was that that plan does not exist. One important step that the Chancellor could take today is to be honest about the real-terms cut in departmental spending that the figures that he announced last week imply. Will he confirm what Treasury officials told the Treasury Committee this morning and give us, in the Chamber now, the projections for departmental spending that he refused to give last week?

Mr. Darling: First, we have set out a plan to cut borrowing by half over a four-year period. I understand the hon. Gentleman's view, which is shared by some others as well, that we could go further and faster. However, I believe that attempting to do what we are doing in a period one year shorter than that would result in taking £26 billion more out of our economy. That would be damaging to our economy and very damaging to our future prospects, which is why I do not think that his policy on this matter is right.

Secondly, in relation to departmental spending, I said in the pre-Budget report last week that I wanted to ensure that we could protect front-line services in the NHS and in schools, and make sure that we had sufficient police on the beat. I made that clear, but I also made it clear that I was not going to fix individual departmental expenditure limits for each Department at this stage, because there is still a lot of uncertainty around. We already have spending for the next year; that remains my position.

Mr. Osborne: I do not think that the Chancellor can be aware of the universal reaction to his PBR statement last week. The international markets believe that there is "no coherent plan" in the UK, that our sovereign credit rating is "vulnerable" and that interest rates are going to be forced higher, leading to the UK losing its "top-notch status" for the first time ever. Every single business organisation slammed the report as being no plan for recovery, and the Chancellor completely betrayed the high responsibility of his office, which would have been to stand up to a Prime Minister who is pursuing a policy of scorched earth and political dividing lines.

I ask the Chancellor a very specific question: will he publish the departmental spending projections? I am talking not about the projections for individual departments, but about the overall departmental expenditure limits that we had to leak after the PBR. His Treasury officials told the Treasury Committee this morning that they would, so will he publish that information this afternoon?

Mr. Darling: I said to the hon. Gentleman that we had not fixed the spending for individual Departments, and until that time it would not be right to speculate on what each Department might or might not get, because there is so much uncertainty. In relation to the general point that he makes, I believe that what we have done is the right thing for the economy. We are supporting the economy. To start taking money out of the economy now, as he proposes, would damage our prospects for the future. It is important at the same time to set out a clear path for reducing the amount of borrowing, and I have done that as well. We are one of the first countries to do that. That is a sensible way of proceeding, it is the right thing to do to support our economy, and it is the right thing to do to support jobs, which Labour Members, at least, regard as being of paramount importance.

Financial Services (Regulation)

3. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): When he next expects to meet representatives of the Bank of England to discuss regulation of the financial services sector. [306844]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Alistair Darling): I have regular meetings with the Governor to discuss a wide range of issues.

Mr. Bellingham: Does the Chancellor agree that his Government's decision to remove from the Bank of England its banking oversight and regulatory function was incredibly misguided and short-sighted? Does he also agree that that is one of the main reasons why the banking and financial crisis in Britain is worse than in practically any other country—apart, perhaps, from Iceland?

Mr. Darling: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. That had nothing to do with the origins of the crisis in the banking sector. The start of the problem was that too many banks, particularly in the United States in the sub-prime market, took on risk that they did not understand. If the hon. Gentleman was right in his analysis, there would not have been a banking crisis in any other country. The fact is that every developed country has experienced this—and as the hon. Gentleman knows, they all have different models in relation to regulation and supervision. The primary responsibility for any organisation must rest with the board of directors of that organisation, and in too many cases they were found wanting. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that his analysis of what happened is wrong.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): In his discussions with the Bank of England about regulation, has the Chancellor discussed, or will he discuss, the involvement of Lloyds TSB in the practice of "stripping"—laundering money—from Iran via London into the United States which has caused it to be fined more than $300 million as a preliminary fine, which ordinary people in the UK are having to pay as a consequence of their ownership of Lloyds TSB?

Mr. Darling: No, but I know that my hon. Friend has raised the matter before. I will write to him about it. I had better do that, for the sake of completeness, and I will arrange for a copy of the letter to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The Chancellor said as recently as 30 November:

"The structure"—

that is, the regulatory structure—

"that we have with the Bank and the FSA is the right one."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2009; Vol. 501, c. 876.]

Given that we have seen loan-to-value ratios of 125 per cent. and rampant self-certification in domestic mortgage lending going unchecked, warnings about the asset price bubble going unheeded, a banking system that came within hours of collapse, and total taxpayer exposure to that banking system now equivalent to about £40,000 per family, could he tell the House what kind of disaster it would take to persuade him that that structure was not the right one?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is working on the basis that it was the regulatory structure that caused those problems. Equally, I might ask him how he thinks reversing the FSA into the Bank of England, with the same people doing the same job, would automatically have meant that the problem would not have arisen. I have explained to the House on many occasions what the problem was. Principally, it was a failure in relation to those responsible for running the banks—a failure to understand the risks to which they had become exposed. Yes, there were mistakes in the regulatory system and the supervisory system in every major developed country in the world. There is no doubt about that, but I honestly do not think that putting the FSA into the Bank of England would have prevented the problem from arising in the first place. I remind the Conservative party that just a few weeks before the crisis, the one policy that it had come up with was a policy that it was not necessary to regulate mortgages, because the risk lay with the institutions not with the individuals. Look where that policy would have ended up.

Remuneration Levels

4. **Mr. Ken Purchase** (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): If he will commission comparative research into levels of remuneration in (a) the banking sector and (b) the public sector; and if he will make a statement. [306845]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): I am happy to look at the case for this research. We understand the pain both of the banking sector and of the public sector quite well, and we are introducing reform to both.

Mr. Purchase: But does the Minister understand the anger that is reflected in the response of public sector workers to the pre-Budget report, when they see the incomes being given, granted to or thrown at the banking sector? Does he not understand that he must take further measures in order to redress the balance? When the economy returns to good health, will he make public sector pay a priority for the Government?

Mr. Byrne: Fixing the very poor level of public sector pay that we inherited was of course a priority for us, and that is why over the past 10 or 11 years the pay of teachers has gone up by 52 per cent., that of police officers by 57 per cent. and that of nurses by 65 per cent. I think that, by and large, we have fixed the investment gap that we inherited from the Conservatives, but as we move into the years ahead we have to prioritise halving the deficit over four years. That is why we are asking for pay restraint in the public sector, starting with public service leaders, whom we are asking to take a pay freeze next year.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): On the Government's proposal to tax banks' bonus remuneration, are the Government yet in a position to say which of the 192 regulated banks it will apply to; what the main exempted categories are, be they shares or contractual

agreements; and, as it will take a long time to suss out the difficult avoidance possibilities, whether they have ruled out the possibility of extending the policy into the next financial year?

Mr. Byrne: I understand that the draft guidance has been published. The proposals that we have introduced are designed to bite on banking groups, but we remain open to the possibility of extending the legislation and the tax if the avoidance measures that some have talked about are put into practice.

Dr. Cable: But does the Minister not agree that one of the important pieces of unfinished business is the largely taxpayer-owned £1.5 billion bonus pool in RBS? As the board of directors publicly defied the Government over that matter, do the Government propose to take any further action, either by replacing those directors or by giving them fresh instructions about how to deal with that bonus pool?

Mr. Byrne: RBS is a bank in which we exercise a certain degree of influence over remuneration policies—but the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that its management have not yet made proposals for a bonus pool.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): If my right hon. Friend undertakes the research that my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) suggested, will he look back to 1979 and see how pay levels have changed since then? Will he look in particular at how the take-home incomes of the richest have been affected by the massive tax cuts for the rich that the Tories introduced at the time?

Mr. Byrne: Of course.

Banks (Penalty Charges)

5. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will take steps to limit the levels of penalty charges imposed by banks on their customers; and if he will make a statement. [306846]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Sarah McCarthy-Fry): The Government announced in the pre-Budget report on 9 December that they would work with consumer groups, the Office of Fair Trading and the banks to agree a new framework that will make bank charges fairer, simpler and more transparent. The Government will take action to deliver change if a voluntary approach does not result in a fair outcome for consumers.

Mr. Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that very helpful reply. She was given a fairly broad hint by the judgment of Lord Walker in the case of Abbey National and others, when he said that his decision was

"not the end of the matter."

and that

"Ministers and Parliament may wish to consider the matter further."

What can she do to review the operation of section 140 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974, which requires fairness in the contractual relationship between banks and customers?

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: The Office of Fair Trading is still considering that judgment in detail, and on 22 December it intends to make an announcement about what further action will be taken. Our position is very clear: we want to see a fairer and more transparent system of charges, and we are working very closely with the OFT to achieve that.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Government's decision to stop unrequested credit card cheques being sent to consumers, but I urge the Minister also to consider unrequested credit card limits. That is of great concern to consumer organisations and very detrimental to the most vulnerable consumers.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has a long record of standing up for the consumer in such matters. We were very pleased to be able to introduce measures to stop the practice of unrequested credit card cheques, and we continuously keep under review how we can best protect our most vulnerable people.

Financial Services (Regulation)

7. **Christopher Fraser** (South-West Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on EU regulation of financial services. [306849]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Sarah McCarthy-Fry): The Chancellor of the Exchequer has regular discussions with European Finance Ministers on EU regulation of financial services, most recently at the ECOFIN meeting on 2 December.

Christopher Fraser: Government complacency has seen the role of Commissioner for Internal Market and Services go to France, and France and Germany have outmanoeuvred the Government on the alternative investment fund managers directive. Have the Government learned a lesson and put in place a new procedure to ensure early engagement over the proposals for regulation of the financial services industry?

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: I disagree. It is not the case that we have not been engaged early in all the processes. The Chancellor and our other Ministers have actively and successfully engaged in the EU agenda, both directly in the EU and within the G20, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that will continue. With the allies that we have in the EU and the European Parliament, we can do that; I am afraid I cannot say the same for the official Opposition party.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this year, the Chancellor was thinking aloud about the potential of an independent macro-prudential early warning system linking the Bank of England to European central banks, and a single micro-prudential rule-making body. Can the Minister say what the state of play is in terms of those developments?

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Our position is very clear: we do think that we need an EU-wide system to protect financial stability. We are also very clear that that EU-wide system should not have any impact on our fiscal responsibilities. As a result of the discussions at the ECOFIN meeting, we have now secured the fiscal safeguard that we were seeking.

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham) (Con): In June the Chancellor said that he was determined to block the moves to force the UK taxpayer to foot the bill for decisions made by the new European supervisory authorities. However, is not the reality that the Chancellor lost that battle in December's ECOFIN meeting? None of the safeguards that he or the Exchequer Secretary talked about amount to a veto to protect national sovereignty and national taxpayers.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: I absolutely disagree. In the negotiations, we secured the fiscal safeguard that our Chancellor went out there for, and which I brought to the House when we had the debate the day before.

Comprehensive Spending Review

8. **Justine Greening** (Putney) (Con): When he expects to announce arrangements for the next comprehensive spending review. [306850]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): Departmental budgets are set until April 2011. As the Chancellor made clear in his statement, now would not be the time for a spending review, given the uncertainties that remain in the world economy.

Justine Greening: But as the Minister will recognise, last week the Chancellor predicted the economic growth for next year, so will he pledge to publish the comprehensive spending review results before next year's general election?

Mr. Byrne: I think that the Chancellor's judgment on that will depend entirely on the uncertainty that we see at the time in the international economy.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister not agree that there is a need right across the United Kingdom for certainty as we look forward into 2010 and beyond, not just for the next 12 months but for a period comparable to that covered by a CSR?

Mr. Byrne: If the Chancellor had set out a spending review earlier this year, for example, it would have been pretty likely that those figures and settlements would have had to be revised, as unemployment turned out to be far lower than we initially expected. Indeed, today the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is setting out the argument for the kind of savings that could be achieved on the welfare bill if, as we hope, unemployment is much lower than it might have been over the next few years. Until that certainty is acquired, it would be wrong to set out to the last pound and the last penny what each individual Department should get. We are very clear that halving the deficit over four years is in the right time frame. Halving it any faster—over three years, for example—would involve taking £26 billion out of public spending. That would mean, for example, putting about 5p on VAT, or halving the education budget.

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): Since last week's pre-Budget report we have learned that the Treasury itself does not believe that the Government's spending plans provide a credible route to restoring our public finances, and that the Schools Secretary was still wringing concessions out of the Treasury after the Chancellor went to bed on Tuesday night. Is it not now clear that even if the Treasury Ministers recognise the scale of the fiscal crisis, they are too weak to do anything about it?

Mr. Byrne: I am sure there must have been a question lurking in there somewhere. I advise the hon. Gentleman not to believe everything he reads in the newspapers. What the Chancellor did last week was set out a clear plan for how we can halve the deficit over four years. It is pretty much the fastest consolidation plan in the G7, and it is also the clearest. We stand by the judgment that four years is the right period over which to halve the deficit. Of course there are people who have advised us to take a different direction and halve the deficit over three years, which would involve some pretty difficult judgments. That is the policy advocated by the Opposition, but they have not yet said whether they would put up VAT by 5p or halve the education budget. Is that because they do not know, or because they will not say?

UK Budget Deficit

9. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the relative effect of the UK budget deficit on the economy in comparison with other G20 economies. [306851]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): In common with that of other G20 countries, UK fiscal policy will continue to support businesses and families until the recovery is secure.

Andrew Selous: Does not the fact that Britain's deficit is larger than that of Greece, which has had its credit rating downgraded, mean that we urgently need to get our finances in order and keep interest rates low so that we can get Britain growing again?

Mr. Timms: We have seen an unprecedented global downturn, and the debt is going up in all the G7 countries as well as other countries. Of course UK debt was low at the beginning, giving us extra fiscal space, as the International Monetary Fund has pointed out. The additional support that we have provided has meant fewer jobs lost, fewer business failures, fewer homes repossessed and less damage to the economy. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has explained, we will now halve the deficit over the next four years and so secure the public finances.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): Is not the most important thing the fact that we have a deficit reduction plan, so that we can keep money in the economy, get through the recession and keep up front-line spending, particularly on health services? In Stoke-on-Trent we need the Haywood hospital and we need our schools, and we do not need the deficit.

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is vital that we have a plan—as we do—and that we can show how we will continue to live within our means while also providing the investment that her constituency and the public services need. We must also continue to support the economy, given the uncertainty that is still around. The Opposition made the wrong call on the banking crisis and the wrong call on the recession, and now they are making the wrong call on the recovery as well.

UK Credit Rating

10. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with credit ratings agencies in respect of the UK's AAA rating. [306852]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): We follow the assessments of the credit rating agencies closely. Moody's restated last week that the UK is a resilient triple A sovereign. Standard and Poor's reaffirmed the UK's triple A rating in May, and Fitch did so in July.

Daniel Kawczynski: The Minister must recognise what terrible financial damage, and loss of prestige to our country, would result if our rating were lowered. How confident is he that our triple A rating will not be lowered over the next six months?

Mr. Timms: It is important that all three major agencies assign us a triple A rating. As I said, Moody's reaffirmed its rating just last week. It clearly helps that we went—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the Minister, but there are a lot of private conversations taking place in the Chamber, and it is very unfair both to the Member—*[Interruption.]* Order. Mr. Fabricant, you know a lot better than that. I know where to look, and I do not require your help. Private conversation is very unfair on the Member asking the question and on the Minister answering it, and I think it would probably be regarded by members of the public as rather rude.

Mr. Timms: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It does help that we went into the recession with low debt, as was underlined in the Moody's note of 26 October. It is also important that we have the plan that we have set out for halving the deficit over the next four years. That is the responsible approach.

Bank Recapitalisation

11. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): What his most recent assessment is of the effectiveness of his programme of bank recapitalisation; and if he will make a statement. [306853]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): Since the events of last October, the Government have acted decisively and comprehensively to support the stabilisation of the banking system and protect depositors. The recent entry of the Royal Bank of Scotland into the asset protection scheme on terms that improve incentives and deliver better risk sharing with the private sector, as well as Lloyds Banking Group's private capital raising, means that banks are better capitalised and better positioned today to support the economy in its recovery.

Ann Winterton: Is the Minister aware of the National Audit Office report that says that neither Lloyds nor the Royal Bank of Scotland are meeting targets for lending to business? Bearing in mind that small and medium-sized enterprises in particular need the oxygen of available credit, what action is he taking to ensure that those two banks meet one of the objectives of re-capitalisation following the huge input of taxpayers' money?

Ian Pearson: I am certainly aware of the NAO's report—a couple of questions on the Order Paper cover the same matter. As the hon. Lady will be aware, the situation is that RBS and Lloyds banking group have made significant strides in improving lending to SMEs. However, a lot of small and big businesses have been paying down debt during this recession, which is why the net lending figures do not look so promising. The banks have signed lending commitments, which are binding, and we expect them to keep to them. We continue to monitor the issue very closely.

Banks (Government Support)

13. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West) (Con): What response his Department plans to make to the National Audit Office report on the Government's support for banks; and if he will make a statement. [306855]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): The Government welcome the National Audit Office's recent report, and particularly its conclusion that the support that we have provided to the banks was justified. We will consider the report and respond in the normal way.

Mr. Amess: I am sure that that response will make very interesting reading, but perhaps the Minister will explain why the Treasury gave a clean bill of health to the Royal Bank of Scotland just weeks before the bail-out.

Ian Pearson: It is my understanding that the Treasury did no such thing. We will obviously respond to the report in detail in due course, but I should like to quote paragraph 19 to the hon. Gentleman:

> "If the support measures had not been put in place, the scale of the economic and social costs if one or more major UK banks had collapsed is difficult to envision. The support provided to the banks was therefore"

clearly "justified".

Economic Growth

15. **Mr. Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): What estimate he has made of the current and future level of growth in the UK economy compared to other G20 countries; and if he will make a statement. [306857]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The pre-Budget report forecast that UK gross domestic product will have fallen by 4.75 per cent. in 2009 and will recover to 1 to 1.5 per cent. growth in 2010. The report did not forecast what will happen in other G20 economies, but world GDP is expected to contract by 1 per cent. this year, then to grow by 3.25 per cent. in 2010.

Mr. Harper: I am grateful to the Minister for those numbers. Given that we are the only G20 country still in recession, he will have to forgive us for not taking his forecast for granted. However, given that over the next couple of years, between pre-crash and post-crash levels, the level of debt in this country will have doubled—in fact, the rise in the debt will be third only to Iceland and Ireland—is the Minister not concerned that our growth levels will be much lower as a result? That will be a dangerous situation for everyone who lives in this country.

Mr. Timms: Let me first of all reassure the hon. Gentleman about our forecast. We said at the time of the Budget that we forecast 1 to 1.5 per cent. growth in 2010. At that time, most people, including the Opposition, said that that was much too optimistic. Today, however, the consensus has caught up with the forecast that we set out. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be reassured by that vindication of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's forecast.

Right across the world, countries are borrowing more, which is the right thing to do. The stimulus that we provided has reduced uncertainty and helped to prevent a spiral of falling confidence and demand. That is why the impact of this unprecedented global shock has been so much less in the UK than many expected. If we had taken the advice of the Conservatives and let the recession take its toll, the damage and the long-term cost to the economy would have been far greater.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware that in certain sectors, there is potential for growth, and those are the ones that the Government need to invest in. I am thinking particularly of so-called green jobs. Intelligent Energy in my constituency is growing as a consequence of not only Government investment but investment from the private sector. That will deliver on jobs, but also from an environmental point of view in, for example, hydrogen fuel cells. Will he ensure that all Government aid is targeted at those future job growth areas, where we will make a significant impact on UK plc?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is right, and I very much enjoyed my visit to Intelligent Energy as his guest a few years ago. Our "New industry, new jobs" strategy is targeting those parts of the economy with the biggest growth potential—for example, green jobs and the digital sector—and ensuring that we have the wherewithal to do well in the future in those sectors.

Comprehensive Spending Review

16. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): When he expects to announce arrangements for the next comprehensive spending review; and if he will make a statement. [306858]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a few moments ago.

Michael Fabricant: Yes, but does he not think that the answer he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) bears all the credibility of that of the Prime Minister when, two years ago, he said that his decision not to hold a general election had nothing to do with the fact that the polls were so bad?

Mr. Byrne: Even the hon. Gentleman would admit that there remains a degree of uncertainty in the international economy. We need only look at events in Dubai and the Gulf to see the kind of instability that persists. Indeed, we are only halfway through the measures agreed at the G20 in London, so we are by no means out of the woods yet. Recovery is not guaranteed, and we cannot know how much we should allocate for welfare benefits. Therefore, it is difficult to pin down to the last pound and penny how much each individual Department should have. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out one of the clearest deficit reduction plans in the G7. We set out our priorities for the year to come, including some £15 billion of cuts and efficiencies in lower priority programmes. What we have yet to see is any plan of sufficient clarity from the Opposition.

Youth Unemployment

17. **Mr. William Bain** (Glasgow, North-East) (Lab): What recent representations he has received on the effect on the economy of the level of youth unemployment. [306859]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): Treasury Ministers and officials receive representations from a wide range of organisations, including on the issue raised by my hon. Friend. We are taking action to ensure that young people are supported through this recession. As he will be aware, this includes a guaranteed job, work experience or training for those young people who remain unemployed for more than six months. That will ensure that we avoid the long-term detachment of young people from the labour market that was such a feature of previous recessions.

Mr. Bain: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Has he taken note of the recent International Monetary Fund "World Economic Outlook" report, which makes it clear that the fiscal stimulus should be continued next year until recovery is on a firmer footing? What assessment would he make of the effects on youth unemployment if deficit reduction replaced going for economic growth as the main aim of economic policy, as some in this House would prefer?

Ian Pearson: My hon. Friend is right. The judgment that the Chancellor made at the time of the pre-Budget report was that we needed to take action to secure sustainable public finances, but we needed to do so in a way that did not jeopardise the recovery. That is why we are planning to halve the deficit over four years. That action, as opposed to the more precipitate action that the Opposition prefer, will give us the best chance of ensuring that we have a sustainable economic recovery and can address youth unemployment.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): If the Government's policies are working so well, why is unemployment in Wellingborough more than double what it was in 1997?

Ian Pearson: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we have been going through a recession in the UK, just like most countries around the world. That has obviously had an effect on unemployment, and that is very regrettable. However, the active labour market policies that this Government have introduced have been highly successful in getting people back to work. Youth unemployment continues to be a problem, but more than half of people leave jobseeker's allowance within three months, and three quarters do so within six months. That is as a result of the programme of policies that we have put in place.

Public Services

18. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the likely effect on the economy of maintaining present levels of Exchequer spending on public services. [306860]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): The combined action of the Bank of England and the Government is supporting up to half a million jobs at the moment. The Government believe that, as there are still risks to the economy, it would be risky to consolidate too quickly.

Charlotte Atkins: The Government have done a lot to try to help young people during the recession, particularly with the guarantee of a job or training after six months of unemployment. Does the Chief Secretary agree that any attempt to reduce spending immediately would scupper the chances of economic recovery and impact in particular on young people coming into the jobs market?

Mr. Byrne: There are those who believe that we ought to be cutting public spending faster, even now, before recovery has been locked in. We think that that would be a risk and that the price would be paid in higher unemployment and more repossessions. That is why last week the Chancellor set out further measures to help to combat youth unemployment and why we think that the right approach is to say to our young people that if they have been out of work for six months they will be offered a job, a place in training or, of course, community service.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What does the Minister think of the work by the International Monetary Fund showing conclusively that the higher the proportion of public spending in an economy, the slower the growth rate?

Mr. Byrne: If the right hon. Gentleman looks at other economies in the OECD or the G7, he will see that the levels of debt forecast among them are pretty much in line with our own. This recession has hit us all. However, we are probably the country that has set out the clearest plan to halve that deficit over the next four years.

Topical Questions

T1. [306866] **John Robertson** (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Treasury's responsibilities remain as I have set out on previous occasions.

John Robertson: My right hon. Friend will be aware of the present difficulties in investment levels in key driving areas. How does he intend to co-operate with the CBI and the TUC to try to maintain the recent excellent progress?

Mr. Darling: It is very important that we do everything possible to get a return of private sector investment in the economy. The public sector has been supporting the economy, particularly through public expenditure, over the past year or so. We can continue that until recovery is established, but part of getting recovery established and achieving growth in the future must be to get private investment going again.

T4. [306869] **Mr. Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does the Minister accept that a decision to press ahead with changes to the furnished holiday let rules will introduce a distortion into the domestic tourism industry, with self-catering accommodation now placed at a competitive disadvantage to bed-and-breakfast accommodation and hotels, and that it will hit rural communities such as mine in Pembrokeshire particularly hard?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): No, I do not, although I am aware of the concern on this issue. We are putting furnished holiday lettings and bed-and-breakfast accommodation on a level playing field. However, a query has been raised, for perfectly understandable reasons, about the legality in European law of providing help to furnished holiday letting accommodation purely in the UK and not elsewhere in Europe. It is very important that we comply with international law.

T2. [306867] **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North) (Lab): In my constituency, more job vacancies are being advertised, and many of those who lost their jobs earlier in the year are now returning to work. However, as growth returns, what more can the Government do to ensure that returning to work always pays more than staying on benefits?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we encourage people back into work, and as part of that, we must ensure that if people do go back into work, they can see the benefit of it. As the House will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will make a statement shortly, and I hope that she will have something further to say about that. However, my hon. Friend is right to emphasise that job vacancies are being advertised everyday. It is our job to ensure that we get people to fill those vacancies as quickly as possible.

T6. [306871] **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Will the Chancellor explain how it is fair that after the national insurance rise, people on low incomes will be paying 32 per cent. tax on their income, while he is letting bankers off the hook with a tax that will be easy to avoid, is full of holes and will raise just 10 per cent. of the £5 billion expected to be paid in bank bonuses this year?

Mr. Darling: In relation to the bank payroll tax, we are trying to change the behaviour of some banks that still want to pay out very large sums in bonuses when we believe that the money would be better applied to building up their capital position. Of course, from next April, people earning more than £150,000 a year—that will include many recipients of these bonuses—will pay tax at the top rate of 50p. In addition, the hon. Lady asked about national insurance. I made the position

clear last week. In particular, I made the point that people earning less than £20,000 would not be paying more as a result of the measures that I introduced.

T3. [306868] **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the level of investment in high-speed rail through the west midlands will be maintained?

Mr. Darling: We have invested a considerable amount of money in the railway system in the west midlands. The upgrading of the west coast main line cost between £7 billion and £8 billion, and has meant more services and, above all, more reliable services than in the past. That is an example of what happens when public investment is run down, because that line last had serious investment in the 1970s. We have put that right and we will continue to do what is necessary to ensure that the railways work.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): Has the Chancellor seen the helpful comments of the right hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), with whom he used to sit in the Cabinet, who said yesterday:

"the reason why this Pre-Budget Report has been so disappointing is that the Prime Minister used his constitutional authority as First Lord of the Treasury to ensure that no full account of our economic predicament was provided, no systematic reform of banking was promoted and no clear account of Labour's approach to closing the fiscal deficit was made"?

The truth is that the Prime Minister and the Schools Secretary overruled the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Sofa government is alive and well, in the form of a Chancellor who bears the impression of the last person who sat on him. Will he take this opportunity to demonstrate his independence and publish the overall departmental spending limit—not for the individual Departments; the overall number, which was leaked by us after the Budget and which he now has an opportunity to publish—after this pre-Budget report? Just answer that question, on the third time of asking.

Mr. Darling: I did see the article by my right hon. Friend. It is fair to say that he has had his disagreements with the Prime Minister over some considerable time; there does not seem to be anything new there. In relation to the departmental expenditure limits, I made the position clear earlier, and I have nothing further to add to that.

T5. [306870] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Chancellor was correct when he said that private businesses had a key role to play in Britain's recovery. Has the Treasury made any comparisons on the relative impact of the current recession, compared with that of the 1990s, on business insolvencies?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): Yes, indeed we have. If we had repeated the experience of the 1990s recession, we would have expected something in the region of two and a half times as many businesses becoming insolvent as have actually done so. The action that we have taken—through the business payment support service, the time-to-pay initiative, the enterprise finance guarantee and other measures that we have taken—has had a genuine impact. There is a distinction to be made between a Government who have provided real help now to businesses through this recession and a Government who, during the 1990s, did nothing and just let companies go to the wall.

T7. [306872] **Willie Rennie** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (LD): I understand that the total cost for the administrators, lawyers and consultants to clear up after the Government break-up of the Dunfermline building society is approaching £26 million. Who was representing the taxpayer's interests when such outrageous fees were agreed for such a small building society?

Mr. Darling: I am not sure that I recognise those figures, although I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as we have the final figures. However, there is a broader point to be made in relation to Dunfermline building society. It would have been nice if we had not been put in that position in the first place, but unfortunately that building society got itself into difficulties and they had to be resolved. That is precisely what we did. Both the hon. Gentleman and I would have liked the Dunfermline to continue as an independent building society. That was not possible, but the reason was that it got itself into difficulties and we had to sort the problems out.

Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Lab): Can we follow the lead of other European countries and introduce a cap on interest rates for the likes of store cards? People will be using store cards over the next few weeks in the run-up to Christmas. If someone spends £1,000, it will take them 15 years to clear that if they simply pay the minimum. That is totally unacceptable.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Sarah McCarthy-Fry): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that there is a problem with the high rates of interest charged by some lenders, particularly to vulnerable people. I am aware that some other EU countries have introduced interest rate caps. However, the evidence from those countries is that introducing a cap has not resolved the problem, as the institutions have got round it by introducing other charges. However, we are still reviewing the position with the Office of Fair Trading.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): Given the recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Wales of a floor for devolved spending in Wales relative to England, are the Government guaranteeing, at least as far as Wales is concerned, that they are banishing the Barnett squeeze?

Mr. Darling: The position in relation to the Barnett formula is that it continues to be the Government's policy, and it is the basis on which allocations will be made to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Over the past 10 or 12 years, Wales has benefited from the increase in public expenditure right across the piece.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): This is a difficult time of year for many small and medium-sized businesses in the UK, with holiday closedowns, holiday pay, and so on. What more can the Government do to improve the payment methods used by UK companies to encourage them to pay their suppliers more quickly?

Mr. Darling: We have introduced a number of measures that will help businesses. One of the most effective has been the time-to-pay regulations, which mean that businesses can stagger their payments of tax. That has eased their cash flow. It has also meant that 95 per cent. of the

undertakings have been met, which benefits the Revenue as well. In addition, we have provided guarantees for loans, which have benefited firms in Scotland, and tax credits have meant that many people's income has been supplemented by as much as £37 a week as a result of what we have been able to do.

T8. [306873] **Mr. David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Is the Chancellor of the Exchequer confident that the banks that have benefited from direct taxpayer support are not exploiting that advantage to the detriment of the building societies?

Mr. Darling: This is something that we keep under close review. I am well aware that we need to ensure that the larger banks—particularly the two in which we have substantial shareholdings—do not behave in a way that is detrimental to the smaller building societies. This is something that we, along with the Financial Services Authority and the Office of Fair Trading, will continue to keep a close eye on.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): This is a difficult time for savers, and they are not being helped by the practice of banks that market savings accounts with a bonus attached to them without telling the savers when the bonus is going to fall away. Could we not require banks to provide that information?

Mr. Darling: I am very much in favour of making more information available to savers—and, indeed, to borrowers—so that they can understand exactly what the terms and conditions are. I agree with my hon. Friend that, at times, those terms and conditions are not as clear as they should be. We want more people to save, and the best way to achieve that is to be very clear and up front about what the saver will get and when they will get it.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Can the Chancellor confirm that the Treasury completely ignored warnings from the Department for Communities and Local Government last autumn about the impact of the rise in business rates on the economy?

Mr. Darling: I only heard part of what the hon. Lady said, but what I can say—which will probably not satisfy her—is that we announced measures earlier this year to allow companies to spread the rates increase over three years, to ease the burden on them.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): In the aftermath of the pre-Budget report, and given the importance that Members of Parliament in Stoke-on-Trent attach to the relocation of jobs from the south-east, what advice can my right hon. Friend give to people in Stoke-on-Trent on how to ensure that we can get such jobs relocated there?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): Over the past few years, we have moved something like 24,000 jobs out of London and the south-east. Just before the pre-Budget report, we said that we would seek to move another 13,000 out over the next few years. I would be very happy to sit down with my hon. Friend and other colleagues from Stoke-on-Trent to talk about how we can maximise Stoke-on-Trent's chances of getting a big share of those new jobs.

T9. [306874] **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Can the Chancellor tell the House how much his Government will be paying in interest on our national debt in the current financial year, and what his estimate is of the interest that will be paid in the next financial year?

Mr. Darling: It is understandable that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about debt, and I can tell him that the debt would have been very much higher had we not taken the action that we did to support our economy and to ensure that we got through the recession. Otherwise, the amount of borrowing and debt would have been far greater.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Despite the cheaper pound and rising house prices, stalled industrial output is still holding the economy back. Will the Chancellor tell the House what progress has been made on his plan to diversify the economy away from the financial services sector?

Mr. Darling: In the pre-Budget report last week, I set out a number of measures to encourage low-carbon industries and to encourage business generally. It is important that we have a diverse economy. The research and development tax credits and the reduced rate of corporation tax for firms that patent discoveries in this country and then develop them here are part of a range of measures all designed to make sure that we have a more diverse economy in the future. In the 1980s, rather too many firms went under and rather too many sectors were badly damaged: we cannot afford to repeat that mistake.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): At some stage in the relatively near future, the Chancellor will receive a welcome windfall from the auction of the spectrum release by the digital dividend process, so will he honour the pledge given to users of radio microphones in the "Digital Britain" White Paper and earmark at least a small proportion of those significant revenues fully to compensate those users for their unwelcome eviction from the spectrum?

Mr. Timms: The Government are in discussion, as I think the hon. Gentleman knows, with those who represent that particular interest. We recognise the importance of it and we are looking to see what we can do to help.

Future Defence Programme

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): I am announcing today changes to the defence programme, which will enhance the support to our personnel on operations in Afghanistan, worth £900 million over the next three years, and reductions elsewhere to make these enhancements affordable and to match our expenditure against available resources. In doing so, I have made every effort to ensure that we balance the priority of supporting our forces in Afghanistan with our commitment to maintaining the capabilities necessary for the future, and that we do not take decisions on major changes that should properly be made in next year's defence review.

As I have said repeatedly to the House, support for our operations in Afghanistan is our main effort. I saw for myself last week the contribution being made by our forces across Afghanistan—taking on the Taliban and beginning to train and partner with the Afghan national army. I pay tribute to their bravery, their professionalism and their dedication.

The defence budget has had the longest period of sustained real growth since the 1980s: it is now £35.4 billion—over 10 per cent. more in real terms than in 1997. As the Chancellor confirmed at the pre-Budget report last week, not a single penny is being cut from the defence budget in 2010-11, but despite this significant investment, acute cost pressures remain. There are a number of reasons for this, including rising fuel and utility costs, increases in pay and pensions and, above all, cost growth in the equipment programme. A number of major projects, while providing superb military capability, have cost more than twice their initial estimate in real terms.

All of this presents us with a significant challenge both in this financial year and as we look forward. The National Audit Office's "Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2009", published today, describes the result of these pressures. Going forward, I am determined that we take action to deal with these pressures and to address the challenges head on. That is why we commissioned the hard-hitting Bernard Gray report, why we are taking steps now to implement his report and why we are reforming defence acquisition better to match our priorities to our spending. Getting this right is critical; tough choices are required. We will be publishing in the new year the strategy that will provide a planning and management framework to produce an affordable equipment plan.

I am determined to ensure that those who put themselves in harm's way on our behalf remain properly supported and resourced. Our priorities in Afghanistan are to provide the best levels of personal equipment and protection to meet the fast-changing threat and to increase investment in key capabilities, including helicopter capability and our strategic air bridge.

I am therefore pleased to announce a number of capability enhancements to support the mission in Afghanistan. They are in addition to the operational costs paid for from the reserve, which continues to increase year on year and has risen from £738 million in 2006-07, when we deployed to Helmand, to over £3.7 billion this year. By the end of 2009-10, the reserve will have contributed over £14 billion to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, including some £5.2 billion on urgent operational requirements.

My decision to fund these enhancements from the core defence programme reflects our determination to ensure that the Ministry of Defence is supporting the current campaign, and our belief that we expect such capabilities to feature in a range of future conflicts that our forces may face. The enhancements total £900 million over three years. They include an improved dismounted close combat equipment package, making equipment such as state-of-the-art body armour and night vision goggles available to 50 per cent. more troops so they can train with it not only before deploying to Afghanistan but before they embark on pre-deployment training; more Bowman tactical radios and patrol satellite systems to improve communications between troops and commanders; an additional £80 million for communications facilities for special forces; increased funding for our intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance capabilities; and a doubling of Reaper capability.

As the Prime Minister announced yesterday, there will be further improvements in our counter-IED capabilities, particularly intelligence and analytical capability to target the networks that are doing so much damage to our troops and to Afghan civilians. There will be an additional C-17 aircraft to strengthen the air bridge, and improvements to defensive aids suites and support arrangements for the Hercules C130J fleet so that we can maximise their deployability and use. There will be 22 new Chinook helicopters, with the first 10 arriving during 2012-13, as set out in the future rotary wing strategy which I also announced today.

In addition to that package, the Treasury has signed off the latest funding from the reserve—over £280 million—to support a range of additional equipment for Afghanistan. It will include more new vehicles—for instance, there will be a 31 per cent. increase in the number of Husky tactical support vehicles and a 40 per cent. increase in the number of Jackal fire support vehicles for deployment in Afghanistan—and additional equipment to combat the threat of improvised explosive devices, including over 400 hand-held mine detectors, robots, and other items of kit. That one-off package is in addition to the resources already allocated for urgent operational requirements for the current financial year, and in addition to the protected mobility package that has already been announced.

The pressure on the public finances means that we need to prioritise carefully within our resources. We need to make reductions in lower priority areas to fund these enhancements, and to better match the defence programme to available resources. That has meant stopping or slowing spending in other areas, and pushing down hard on headquarters costs and overheads. Inevitably these measures will have an impact on some capabilities, but we judge that it will be manageable.

We will continue to reduce the number of civilians working in the Ministry of Defence. We recognise the importance of the civilian work force and the critical outputs that they deliver. That is why in the pre-Budget report we announced an independent study of the shape and size of the civilian work force, including the distribution of tasks between civilian and military personnel. This study will be undertaken by Gerry Grimstone and will inform the defence review. Without prejudicing its outcome,

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

we would expect to be able to continue reducing the overall size of the civilian work force, above the 45,000 reduction already made since 1997. This is not just about doing more with less; we will need to make some hard decisions about what we can stop doing altogether, and about how we can bear down on other costs.

The other key adjustments we are making to the current programme are as follows. In line with our current aspirations to reduce to two fast jet types—the Typhoon and joint strike fighter—we will pursue without delay the Typhoon future capability programme phase 2. This is fundamental to the development of its multi-role capability and integration with the latest weapons. We will reduce now the size of our Harrier fast jet force by one squadron, close RAF Cottesmore and consolidate the Harrier force at RAF Wittering. This will maintain our joint carrier-based combat air capability. We plan to reduce our Tornado and Harrier force by a further one or two squadrons; decisions on the make-up of our future force will be taken in the defence review.

We intend to withdraw the Nimrod MR2 force 12 months early and slow the introduction of the MRA4. This will have an impact on our use of RAF Kinloss, but there is no change to our assumptions on the future basing of the MRA4 at this stage. The decision to withdraw the MR2 has been taken for financial reasons and is unconnected to the report by Mr. Haddon-Cave on the circumstances that led to the tragic loss of the Nimrod XV230 in Afghanistan. Mr. Haddon-Cave was very clear in his report that the aircraft remains safe to fly. I will make a further statement on Mr. Haddon-Cave's report in the House tomorrow.

We intend temporarily to reduce some aspects of Army training that are not required for current operations. We will also take one survey ship and one minehunter out of service early, and cancel the current competition for unprotected utility vehicles and defer the programme for two years. We will bring forward the planned reduction in some of the older maritime Lynx and Merlin Mk 1 aircraft prior to the transition to the more capable Wildcat and Merlin Mk 2. We will spend less next year than previously planned on the wider defence estate but will continue to prioritise investment in both service family accommodation and single living accommodation.

The measures I have set out will also have implications for service personnel numbers. The details have not yet been finalised, but the emphasis will be on prioritising our manpower for operations in Afghanistan. Changes will be targeted so as to avoid affecting personnel involved in current operations. Reductions in service personnel numbers will mainly be managed by slowing recruitment and releasing some personnel, in accordance with their contracts. I appreciate that these changes will be difficult for many service and civilian personnel, their families and the communities in which they are based. I am fully aware of the consequences, and we will support those affected.

In making these choices, I have had to consider that the Government and the Opposition parties are committed to carrying out a defence review after the next election. A Green Paper explaining the Government's vision of what that review should encompass will be published early in the new year. The measures reflect our stated priority of support for the Afghan campaign, and continued investment in new capabilities with enduring military benefit. This is a difficult balance to strike, but I am confident that we have got that balance right, and that that will be demonstrated where it matters most: on the front line, where our brave servicemen and women, supported by MOD civilians, are fighting for the future of Afghanistan and the security of our own country.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and for prior sight of it, although we read much of it this morning in the media. It is hard not to feel some sympathy for the Secretary of State, whom I know to be personally very committed to our armed forces. However, despite the sweeteners, making cuts to our wider defence capability when we are fighting a war in Afghanistan only strengthens the perception that we have a Government who do not give a high priority to the armed forces.

The Government who were willing to waste £12.4 billion on a pointless VAT cut when they had to salvage their own reputation do not seem to have the same resolve when it comes to the country's national security. The Ministry of Defence's internal instructions were clear: allow for standing military tasks and do not prejudge the strategic defence review; and there is to be no capability removal but some shaving off. In other words, this is about numbers not fleets.

What will be the effect of the pre-Budget report on the MOD's core budget, given that the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that non-protected Departments in the settlement will have to bear cuts of 16 per cent. over three years? By how much does it increase the £6 billion black hole highlighted in the Gray report? Is it true that the new Chinook aircraft will be funded from the cancellation of the future medium capability helicopter programme, not from savings arising from cuts in the RAF's Tornado and Harrier fleets? If so, where has the £1 billion of savings from those cuts gone? What impact will the reduction in Tornado and Harrier squadrons have on the RAF force elements readiness strategy? What does the Secretary of State mean when he says that decisions on the make-up of our future forces will be taken later? Does the Treasury intend further cuts? Although more Chinooks will be welcome, we have to accept that we will not get them until 2013—12 years after we went to Afghanistan. Does that not indicate the sheer stupidity of the Government's decision to cut the helicopter budget by £1.4 billion in 2004? When we get the new Chinooks, will they have a standard US army fit or will they incorporate the Thales Julius cockpit upgrade being applied to current RAF aircraft?

How will our submarines be protected following the withdrawal of the Nimrod MR2 next spring? How will the requirement for long-range rescue and maritime reconnaissance be provided once the Nimrods are gone? What aspects of Army training does the Secretary of State intend to reduce? Will he be specific about that? What implications does his statement have for the defence training review and RAF St. Athan?

Why are we cutting minehunter capacity when tension in the Gulf is rising? The Secretary of State is well aware that our minehunter capability is one of the capabilities most valued by our US army allies. We need to ensure that we maintain that capacity at a time when there are rising fears and tensions about what Iran intends to do. There is a real possibility of the Gulf being mined, so will he think again about removing a

minehunter at an extremely sensitive time? In particular, will he consider the impact that that will have on the confidence of our allies?

There are many questions to be answered. The Secretary of State says nothing about the current carrier status and the possible downgrading of our facilities in Cyprus—again, that has been widely trailed in the media. The important thing for the House to consider is why cuts are being made to our defences at all. This is not about reprioritising spending for Afghanistan. He told us on television at the weekend that the Treasury reserve is paying, mostly, for the extra costs in Afghanistan. The Government say that they have maintained defence spending at about 2.5 per cent. of gross domestic product during their time in office, but that is only if spending in Iraq and Afghanistan is included. In other words, by their own definition, they are trying to fight wars on a peacetime budget. Our defences are being cut not as a response to a diminished threat—if anything, the threat is going up out there—or to a reassessment of our strategic needs, or in order to reshape our armed forces. A Government who have had four Defence Secretaries in four years, one of whom was part-time, and no defence review for 11 years are now cutting the capability because of their own catastrophic economic management.

Overspent and over-borrowed, in a worse economic mess than most of our competitors, last out of recession and with a shrinking wealth creation sector, the Prime Minister in his bunker is still living out the fantasy of what a great Chancellor he was, while all the time his Secretaries of State are having to make real cuts to their departmental budgets. This is the end—the final pathetic chapter in the new Labour project. After 12 wasted years, in debt up to our eyeballs, barely able to finance the Government's borrowing and worried about our credit status, we are now having our national security cut as a consequence. Who is paying for the Government's incompetence? Our brave armed forces, at least until we get a general election, when the real culprits will pay.

Mr. Ainsworth: I did explain to the hon. Gentleman—he knows the true facts—that no cuts in our budget are proposed this year. None whatsoever. We have enjoyed a steady rise in the defence budget that has made it 10 per cent. higher in real terms. He says repeatedly—I have heard it before—that we are fighting wars on a peacetime budget, but the Opposition supported our operations in Iraq and in Afghanistan and do not offer a single penny more for defence. He can go round all he likes trying to undo the public statements of the shadow Chancellor by ringing up members of the defence industry and saying, "It won't really apply," but the Opposition have to tell one story in public and the same story in private. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) does not offer a single penny more for defence, despite his allegations.

On the withdrawal of Nimrod, I do not take these decisions without consulting the Chief of the Air Staff and the First Sea Lord. Other platforms are capable of providing the maritime patrol responsibilities. They have done so before—they are Merlin and Hercules, and we can meet our obligations with those other platforms. We will continue to support the cost of current operations through the reserve, but it is quite ridiculous of the hon. Gentleman to suggest that the only thing that ought to pay for anything that is usable in current operations is the reserve. Of course we need Chinook in theatre in Afghanistan, but we will use Chinook elsewhere. Chinook is a considerable uplift in our helicopter capability not only for Afghanistan but for elsewhere, too.

The hon. Gentleman has nothing to complain about. He offers no additional money for defence and he really should stop pretending that he does.

Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement and for advance sight of it. Nobody will argue against the new equipment that will go to our front-line troops in Afghanistan and the additional capability that it will give them, but one must inevitably ask some questions about the details. The most eye-catching is the order for 22 new Chinook helicopters, of which the first will arrive in 2012-13. But how many will really arrive in 2013, when will the others get there and how does that fit in with President Obama's timeline of beginning the withdrawal from July 2011? Would it not have helped if this decision had been taken a good deal earlier? Does this not prove the folly of the 2004 cuts in the helicopter budget?

We will all feel sorry for the Secretary of State because the Treasury has made him come here today, raiding core defence budgets to pay for these additional orders. What sense does it make for these decisions to be taken outwith the strategic context of the strategic defence review, which everybody is signed up to after the election? What will be the additional cost to the long-term defence budgets, and what will be the diminution of our core capability?

In 2001, we entered Afghanistan, and in 2003 we entered Iraq. The fact of the matter is that the fighting has been done on the cheap ever since. It is true that the Treasury has supplied UORs, but the fact of the matter is that the core defence budget has been creaking under the strain of these engagements ever since they began. The Secretary of State and the Ministry have tried to put off painful decisions until after the general election, but today harsh reality has caught up with them.

Mr. Ainsworth: As I said in my statement, 10 of the 22 Chinooks will become available in the financial year 2012-13. It is all right for Opposition Members to talk about it being too late, but they know that we have doubled the helicopter hours available to our troops in Afghanistan and that there are 79 per cent. more helicopters. We have just put the Merlin into theatre, and the new Chinook capability not only will be greatly welcomed, but will come on top of all the enhancements that we have managed to achieve in the current fleet.

The hon. Gentleman talks about us cutting core capability, but how is providing twice as much Reaper capability in theatre, as we have at present, and providing additional Chinooks cutting core capability? Yes, these decisions are being taken ahead of a strategic defence review, but can he tell me what sensible person believes that ISTAR, unmanned aerial vehicles, helicopter lift in theatre and the kind of strategic airlift capability provided by C-17 are not what will be needed in the future? I do not believe that any of these decisions are cutting across decisions that will quite properly be made as part of a strategic defence review.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Thirty-two right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. As the House knows, there is another statement to follow. I should

[Mr. Speaker]

like, as usual, to accommodate as many Members as possible but, to do so, short questions and—I gently say to the Secretary of State—short answers will be required.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): I listened to my right hon. Friend's statement with interest, and I require reassurance on two quick points. First, will he reassure me that the cut to the minesweeper and survey vessel will not impact on Plymouth and the work carried out there? Secondly, when looking at the defence estate, will he, as I assume that he will, do everything he can to speed up the sale of significant parcels of land that have been hanging around for some time and need to be moved on?

Mr. Ainsworth: The detail of my proposals has to be worked through, but I will talk to my hon. Friend and any other constituency Member about the consequences of the withdrawal of the minesweeper and the survey vessel. Of course, if there are opportunities to release capital receipts by disposing of land that is not required, we will try to do that as quickly as possible. I know that the city of Plymouth wants us to do that so that reshaping can happen and people can get on with their development plans for the city.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): Several of the announcements will be very welcome—not least the wonderful announcement on Chinook, which will fly into and out of the equally wonderful RAF Odiham, which is in my constituency—but others will be less so. Precisely what aspects of Army training will be reduced, and by how much?

Mr. Ainsworth: We will prioritise the training that is required for current operations. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, there has been a big shift towards using facilities in Kenya, which are very suitable for current operations. However, we must consider other aspects of Army training, for example regarding Challenger 2 tanks. We will not require the Challenger in Afghanistan because it is not suitable for that theatre. There are therefore reductions that we can make so that we can focus and improve our concentration on, and support for, current operations.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government intend to continue building two aircraft carriers? Furthermore, will he confirm that it is in fact only the Government who are committed to building carriers at all?

Mr. Ainsworth: We are committed to the carriers. Nothing that I have said today affects the carrier programme in any way. I am sorry to tell my hon. Friend, however, that that does not mean that we can provide the three or four carriers that he has on occasion asked for.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Con): Does the Secretary of State begin to understand the very dangerous precedent that he has created by giving in to the Treasury demand that Afghan expenditure should be funded from the core defence budget and not from the contingency fund? Does he not understand that there is hardly an example in living memory of that being done? How will he resist future demands from the Treasury—and they will come—that Afghan expenditure should be at the expense of the core defence budget itself?

Mr. Ainsworth: It is right and proper—and the principle remains in place—that the additional costs of our operations in Afghanistan will be paid for out of the reserve and not the core budget. Everything, from the bullets and bombs that are used through to the additional allowances paid to our troops, comes from that source, and will continue to do so. Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman seriously suggesting that we should not be interested in using the core defence budget on major upgrades, such as a whole new fleet of helicopters? Is he saying that we should not buy anything that is relevant to our current operations out of that budget, but that we should expect the Treasury to buy anything and everything that is usable in theatre in Afghanistan? That really is unsustainable, and I think that he knows it.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): This time last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck) and I had just returned from Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend's announcement today of enhanced capabilities for our troops in Afghanistan includes many of the things that they were asking for, but I want to ask particularly about close combat. Is he listening to what the front-line troops are saying about how we need to evolve our close-combat gear to give them additional agility and to improve their effectiveness?

Mr. Ainsworth: Absolutely. I have had, as my hon. Friend will have had, repeated requests from troops. We know that there have been considerable improvements in personal kit and equipment for our operations in theatre, but we want to train as we will be expected to fight. We have enough close-combat equipment to provide for our troops in theatre, and overwhelmingly for their pre-deployment training before they go into theatre, but this package will allow people to get the kit and equipment that they will be using in pre-deployment training and in theatre before they begin their pre-deployment training. They will therefore be able to train with it for longer, and thus be more familiar with it and more capable as a result.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the number of RAF recruits going through basic training at Halton is due to fall next year, compared with this? Does that imply that the Government expect the RAF to become smaller in size over the next few years?

Mr. Ainsworth: Our recruitment to all our armed forces has been very effective in the last couple of years, to the point that the Army is now fully manned. The detail of the impact on personnel is yet to be worked out, but I do not envisage the kind of effects that the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk) (Lab): I welcome the measures announced by my right hon. Friend, but does he not think that it is time to reflect on whether we can avoid a reduction in non-operational training, for example, by determining whether we will get good value for money from the replacement of Trident?

Mr. Ainsworth: The Government's position on the nuclear deterrent is clear. We consulted widely on the White Paper that we published in 2006, and our view has not changed. I do not think that any sensible person would say that we should not prioritise the kind of training needed for the current operations at the expense of lower priorities at this time. We have 9,500 people in theatre and, as we have sadly found out, it is a very dangerous theatre of operation. That has to be our main priority and our main effort.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman understand that, while the deployment of the 22 Chinooks in Afghanistan is much to be welcomed, many of us believe that they should have been ordered many months ago? Does he understand that that omission was culpable and negligent, and that men have died needlessly as a consequence?

Mr. Ainsworth: As I have said to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, he stands as a member of a party that supported our operations, yet does not offer and has not offered a single penny more for defence. He has to square that with the kind of comments that he has just made.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend be absolutely confident that there will be no capability gap between our existing aircraft carriers and the deployment of our new carriers as a result of any slippage in the carrier programme?

Mr. Ainsworth: I know why my hon. Friend asks that question. A statement was made in his Committee this morning. That was an erroneous statement. There is not a problem of a gap. There is an issue of training that we need to look at and of which we are fully aware. We are examining it and mitigating it. There is no gap in the programme between the existing carriers and the future carriers.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): Does the Secretary of State understand that many of us believe that he is a victim of the serious misjudgment of the military action against Iraq, compounded by the parsimony of the Treasury? What are the foreign policy and military implications of such a substantial reduction in the offensive capability of the Royal Air Force in advance of a defence review?

Mr. Ainsworth: There is some £3.5 billion from the Treasury reserve this year—the figure has gone up from £700-odd million in 2006—so if that is what the right hon. and learned Gentleman calls parsimony, they are pretty big figures and they have covered the additional costs of our operations in Afghanistan. When he talks about the effects on the RAF, to some extent the future of the RAF lies with unmanned aerial vehicles, and there is a proposal for a very substantial increase in unmanned aerial vehicles in the package that I am announcing today.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): In August two lightly damaged Chinooks—one of them damaged by small arms fire—were destroyed by our own forces because the security situation is so dire that we could not guard them for the 36 hours that it would have taken to lift them to a place of safety. Because of the deteriorating security situation, is it sensible to order more Chinooks that are vulnerable to small arms fire and to surface-to-air missiles?

Mr. Ainsworth: The Chinook is far, far from a vulnerable aircraft. Those two will be replaced, and the replacements for the two that were damaged in theatre will be paid for by the reserve in line with the principles that underpin what should be paid for by the Treasury reserve and what should come from the core defence budget.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): What plans does the Secretary of State have to explain to the British people and to his colleagues in Government the direct relationship between the excellence of Her Majesty's forces, which comes at a price, the security of this nation in terms of energy, food, water, all the goods that they buy to fill their kitchens and their fridges, their cars and their computers, and the ability of Her Majesty's forces to have global reach to protect this country, all of which comes at a price worth paying?

Mr. Ainsworth: The principal vehicle for doing that is the Green Paper that we will publish in the new year, which will raise all those questions, and I hope inform the debate about the future of defence. We have co-operation from all the parties that are part of the defence advisory board that is looking at the Green Paper and should provide a good intellectual underpinning for the strategic defence review that will be necessary and come after the general election.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The whole country will agree that my right hon. Friend has taken the right decision in focusing entirely on the important activity in Afghanistan. He referred to a survey vessel. Will he ensure that in working through the details of the withdrawal of that vessel, there is close integration and discussion with the broader scientific community to make sure that the valuable work that that vessel has done is not lost?

Mr. Ainsworth: We have to try to maintain oceanic survey capability to the maximum degree that we can, but we have to prioritise our current operation, so the answer to my hon. Friend is yes—of course we will try to look at the detail and make sure that we still have the necessary minimum capability.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil) (LD): The Secretary of State will be aware that the chief of defence materials told the Defence Committee this morning that he is willing to consider building the Chinooks through AgustaWestland under the existing licensing agreement with Boeing. Will the Secretary of State assure me that he will instruct his officials actively to explore that option, if it can be done on time and on budget?

Mr. Ainsworth: I would not turn my back on that option in principle, but, on the costs and the time frame, I do not believe that we will be able to get the Chinook capability via that route. If somebody were able to convince me otherwise, that would be absolutely fine. I can say, though, that in our remodelled helicopter fleet, AgustaWestland will have a very important role. It will still provide two of the four helicopter platforms that we plan to continue into the future—the Merlin and the Lynx Wildcat.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain why the statement did not include anything about Britain's nuclear weapons? Would it not have been a good opportunity to announce the cancellation of the Trident replacement programme, thus saving a great deal of money?

Mr. Ainsworth: The answer to that is: I do not believe that it would be a good idea to make such an announcement, because I do not agree with my hon. Friend.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): Most of the capabilities that the Secretary of State has today announced will be sent to Afghanistan have been flagged up over the past year by the military in Afghanistan, as many hon. Members have said. Why has it taken so long for those capabilities actually to come into play? Is it because the Treasury and the Prime Minister delayed them?

Mr. Ainsworth: It has not taken so long, and the hon. Gentleman knows that we have made repeated announcements of capability uplifts in all kinds of areas. I heard some so-called expert on the television today say, "Why are we only getting IED capability now when we have been in Afghanistan for eight years?" Well, we have not been in Helmand for eight years, and the threat changed. If we care to remember, a couple of years ago the big problem was head-on assaults, small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): There is an overwhelmingly responsibility on any British Government to protect and support British manufacturing and British jobs. Following the question from the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws), could I, as joint chair of the Unite parliamentary group, ask what discussions my right hon. Friend has had with AgustaWestland, as part of its strategic defence agreement with the MOD, to build the Chinook helicopter under the existing licence agreement? Will he consider—even at this late stage—a British bid and meet Unite representatives so that they can put forward their case?

Mr. Ainsworth: I have said that I would not rule out in principle such an option, but in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, where budgets are tight and we need to have that capability as quickly as possible, I am not prepared to enter into an arrangement that delays and increases the cost of those aircraft. I want those Chinooks; I want them as quickly as I can get them; and I want them at an affordable price. I do not think that we are breaking our long-term relationship with AgustaWestland, which will continue to be a major supplier of helicopter capability to us.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the cost growth in equipment programmes, and we understand from this morning's report that the Government delay in pursuing the carrier contracts has caused an uplift in the price of more than £600 million and had knock-on effects on the work forces of Rosyth and Devonport. How is that value for money?

Mr. Ainsworth: Look, difficult decisions have to be taken in order to prioritise the equipment programme. I heard a Conservative spokesman today describe how things might be different, but the Conservatives would have ordered the carrier, wouldn't they? They would also surely—or would they?—have prioritised the things that we have prioritised, so if they are going to make the allegation that we did something wrong, they have to be prepared to spell out what they would have done differently, and they have singularly failed to do that.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): My friend said a few moments ago that Government policy on Trident had not changed since 2006, but that is incorrect; the Prime Minister has floated the possibility of going down from four boats to three boats. If that were to happen, how much would be saved?

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend needs to look at the White Paper, because the possibility of going down from four boats to three boats was floated at the time. I have to say to him that that would not save money in any near year because, as I am sure that he will appreciate, all the costs of the fourth boat come pretty late in the programme.

Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): Given that the Tornado force is being reduced, RAF Marham in my constituency will be affected. The Secretary of State will appreciate that it is an extremely busy base that could not function without its dedicated local staff. What impact assessment have the Government undertaken to assess the effect that the cuts will have on local unemployment and unemployment as a whole?

Mr. Ainsworth: We will obviously have to look at that. The operation at Marham is particularly impressive—I have been there myself—and we do not want to do anything to undermine the good work that is being done there. However, we have to prioritise the kinds of kit and equipment that are needed for our current operations, and that will lead to a reduction in the number of fast jets that we have. The decision on the breakdown between Harrier and Tornado will have to be taken as part of a strategic defence review. Considerations of the kind that the hon. Gentleman is talking about will of course be part of that evaluation.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The counties of Rutland and Leicestershire will be alarmed at the proposed closure of RAF Cottesmore, which is, inter alia, a significant contributor to the local economy. Will the Secretary of State, as a well-regarded trade unionist in a former life, indicate to the House what plans he has to consult the local work force and, indeed, the wider local community about the impact of this suggested closure?

Mr. Ainsworth: We will be consulting them through the chain of command, and helping them in any and every way that we can. All I would say to my hon. Friend is that if we are to pay for the kind of enhancements that we need, and that are and should be our priority, there has to be something on the other side of the balance. We will try to help the people affected.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement. He will know that Government statistics show that, since 1997, 9,500 defence jobs have been lost in Scotland, bases have closed, regiments have been amalgamated, and in recent years £4.3 billion less has been spent on defence in Scotland than has been contributed by taxpayers in Scotland—and today the cuts have continued. RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth in my constituency will be significantly affected. The MOD must have worked out the manning and spending implications of today's announcement. Will the Secretary of State confirm the

staffing implications of the announcement for RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth? What are the projected cost savings at both bases? Taking into account the changes in the statement, how many service personnel and civilian MOD staff will be based in Scotland? How much will the defence underspend in Scotland grow by?

Mr. Ainsworth: All I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that if the policies of his party were pursued, short of his policy of independence, there would be massive reductions in MOD-related jobs in Scotland. If he then got his own way on independence, one can only imagine the calamity in terms of the defence footprint north of the border. We are not going to close Kinloss, but obviously Nimrod MR2 activity there will cease, and that will have a significant impact on the levels of activity out of the base.

Mr. David Hamilton (Midlothian) (Lab): A few moments ago, my right hon. Friend said to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan) that if the Chinooks came in on time and at the right price, he would not turn his back on British workers. Will he agree to meet my hon. Friend, with Unite colleagues, to talk about that issue?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am prepared to talk to my hon. Friends and other hon. Members at any time, and I had some discussions with the Unite trade union yesterday evening. Within the parameters of what I have said, of course I will talk to my hon. Friend and others.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): The Secretary of State deserves respect for taking some very tough decisions that his predecessors should perhaps have taken many years ago. Nevertheless, he said in his statement that from the £900 million to be raided from the core budget, he is funding body armour, night vision goggles, Bowman tactical radios and counter-IED capabilities. By no stretch of the imagination is that justified, because he is raiding future defence capability to fund current operations, which the Treasury should be paying for directly.

Mr. Ainsworth: The close combat support package needed for our operations in Afghanistan is already in place and being provided, and we have additional capability for pre-deployment training. What the Army would ideally like is that suite of capability right throughout the Army, and this change takes us a step towards that so that it has equipment such as night vision goggles before pre-deployment training. We cannot reasonably ask the reserve to fund that and to re-equip the Army completely.

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): On behalf of the 2,000-plus workers at the Scotstoun yard in my constituency, may I thank my right hon. Friend for his announcement about the carriers? Can he allay some of my concerns about servicemen and women who come back from Afghanistan or any other theatre, and those who retire? I am concerned that they may not receive the help, financial support and training that they sometimes need when getting back into civilian life. Will he assure me that the cuts will not affect those people?

Mr. Ainsworth: First, carriers are a very important capability that we remain committed to. With regard to the ongoing welfare needs of our armed forces, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones), is looking seriously at how we can enhance the situation and protect people. We take the matter very seriously.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent) (Con): It is a central tenet of military life that time spent in training saves lives on operations, even if that training is of a more generalised nature, as the Secretary of State said in reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot). What precise cut in the training budget is he looking for?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am looking to maintain all the training necessary, if at all possible. That includes both pre-deployment training for Afghanistan and the kind of training that we undertake in perfectly relevant theatres such as Kenya. There has been an emphasis on Kenya, and therefore we have done less training elsewhere in recent years. We have to give priority to the kind of training that is necessary for our current operations, and that is what we will do.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) (LD): When will the Secretary of State be in a position to make a statement to the House about the future of HMS Endurance? Is he aware of the debilitating effect that the continuous drift of the carrier programme is having on the work force in Portsmouth dockyard? They were led to believe that dates for the carrier build would be given this year, but they are now going further and further away and jobs are at risk. Is he certain that there will be no further drift in the carrier programme as far as the Government are concerned?

Mr. Ainsworth: I do not know about "continuous" delays to the carrier programme. As the hon. Gentleman knows and as we have acknowledged, we delayed the programme, but there is not a continuous delay, and there will be no further delay as a result of my statement today. We are cutting steel now for the carriers, so work is progressing. We are still assessing the situation with regard to HMS Endurance.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): As recently as 28 October, the Secretary of State came to the House under considerable pressure and claimed that he had attracted some additional ring-fenced money from the Treasury for Territorial Army training. Since then, we have heard of cuts and a lack of finance getting through to the Army Cadet Force, the officer training corps at universities and the TA itself. Will he look into that and confirm that there will be no cuts to the reserves' training, as he articulated as recently as October?

Mr. Ainsworth: There are no cuts to the TA in the package announced today.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State think again about withdrawing the minehunter from the Gulf? Does he remember the signals that were sent out and what happened when the survey ship Endurance was removed from the south Atlantic?

Mr. Ainsworth: Of course, I will bear in mind the points made by the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). However, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) should not exaggerate the situation. We have minehunters active in the Gulf area, as we have had for a considerable time. They are very valuable assets that a lot of nations appreciate.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The need for this statement and the shambles around the TA statement in October are signs that the management of defence is in the most desperate straits. The price of that is being paid by service personnel as well as by the equipment and training budget. Will the Secretary of State give more details about the reductions in service personnel numbers? The statement says that that will involve "releasing some personnel", but how many is "some"?

Mr. Ainsworth: The details are still being worked on, but I find it hard to square the hon. Gentleman's allegation with an announcement that pushes another £900 million in the direction of our forces deployed in Afghanistan. How on earth can he square what he says with that?

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. He describes helicopters and the strategic air bridge as key capabilities. Can he outline what beneficial difference there will be to troops on the ground within the next two to three years before the first Chinook arrives?

Mr. Ainsworth: We continue to deploy the Merlin fleet and I believe that there are now five or six Merlin in theatre. They have given us a considerable uplift—we have more than doubled helicopter hours. We will continue to try to be as efficient, and to get as many of our existing helicopters into theatre and as much use from them as we can. Of course, the Chinook will provide yet more in-theatre lift, which will be very valuable. As I have said, we will get 10 of them in the financial year 2012-13. The additional C-17—the seventh—will be a real boon to the strategic airlift, which is so important to getting troops and supplies in and out of theatre.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): Nobody is fooled. This announcement is about very serious and possibly savage cuts in our overall defence capabilities, and indeed downgrading our armed forces. That is a direct result of the antipathy towards defence funding and the appalling economic stewardship of the Prime Minister when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. When the Secretary of State read the National Audit Office report today that talks about a possible defence deficit of £36 billion in this decade, who did he blame?

Mr. Ainsworth: There has been a 10 per cent. real-terms increase in the core defence budget since 1997 supplemented by £14 billion for our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan from the Treasury reserve. Not a single penny has been cut in the defence budget this year, but we are dealing with the pressures that exist and redirecting money towards current operations.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My constituents at RAF Lyneham will no doubt welcome the extra defensive aids suites for their C130Js, and indeed the extra C-17, but it is very hard to imagine how, when they are fully stretched, as they are at the moment, they can possibly get any more out of the very limited C130J fleet. Is it not time that the Secretary of State cancelled the A400M and the ridiculous closure of RAF Lyneham?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am told that we can get more out of them. Of course, if we have a greater proportion of them fully fitted with defensive aids capability, they will be more deployable. I think we can get more use and more deployability out of the Hercules fleet.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given the Secretary of State's answer to an earlier question, how exactly are the Merlin and Hercules going to cover the gap caused by the withdrawal of Nimrod, given the pressure on resources?

Mr. Ainsworth: The sea rescue capability can be provided, as it has been in the past, by platforms other than the Nimrod. I am told that that can happen and that we can meet all our obligations through the use of other platforms.

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): Will the new vehicles being deployed to Afghanistan include tracked versions of the Mastiff family of vehicles to provide greater flexibility and manoeuvrability, not least because the Mastiff has saved the lives of hundreds of British service personnel?

Mr. Ainsworth: We have no plans for a tracked version of Mastiff. The hon. Lady will know that we have almost doubled the number of Mastiffs available to commanders in Afghanistan since August of this year.

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State now answer the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) and the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) about how hollow this announcement sounds in relation to the announcement in 2004 about a £1.4 billion cut to our helicopter fleet?

Mr. Ainsworth: The situation in 2004 was very different from the situation today. If the hon. Gentleman recalls, our operations in Iraq had only just begun and we were not even present in southern Afghanistan—*[Interruption.]* We were not even present in southern Afghanistan. The decision today will be very welcome as an appropriate shift of priorities in favour of current operations.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): MOD civilian staff give loyal and long service, which is not always very well paid, in places such as the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency in Bicester in my patch. Will the Secretary of State give an undertaking to the House that those employees will be properly briefed by the line of command about what will happen to them, and about who will be retained in core functions and who might be at risk of being privatised? There is a lot of uncertainty around, and the very least that is owed to them is that the MOD—as a good employer—should tell them what is happening.

Mr. Ainsworth: We will seek to do that, and that is in marked contrast to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Woodspring about massive cuts in civilian headcount in the MOD which could, if not properly structured, lead to uniformed staff doing civilian jobs at increased cost, not at a saving. We will look at this, plan properly and consult our staff.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Secretary of State's announcement of 22 additional Chinooks will be very welcome, and it gives this House an opportunity to praise the professionalism and skill of the Chinook pilots and their aircrews, who risk their lives day in and day out in Afghanistan. Is the Secretary of State planning to increase the number of pilots and aircrews who fly Chinooks, or will he ask the existing pool to fly more often and make more visits to Afghanistan?

Mr. Ainsworth: When we commit ourselves to providing increased helicopter lift, we are not committing ourselves just to buying the frames. A lot of work needs to be done in terms of logistics supply, training and the provision of crews for that fleet.

Mr. Speaker: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members and congratulate them on their co-operation, because 38 Back Benchers were able to question the Secretary of State, which is a very good record.

Benefit Reform

4.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Yvette Cooper): With permission, I shall make a statement on the Employment White Paper and the consultation document on housing benefit that we are publishing today.

Families across Britain have been affected by the worst global recession in living memory. We made clear last year our commitment to help people through the recession—through wider support for the economy, but through strong active labour market policies too. We set out £5 billion additional investment this year and next to help people back to work. We expanded the help in Jobcentre Plus, and set out funding for 300,000 youth job and training places and more apprenticeships. We also pressed on with welfare reforms to avoid the big increases in inactivity that we saw in past recessions.

The claimant count for November stands at 1.64 million, and we expect it to rise further in the new year. The International Labour Organisation's measure of unemployment stands at 2.46 million. However, the action that we have taken has made a difference. It has kept unemployment lower than people expected, and lower than in previous recessions too. The claimant count is about 400,000 lower than predicted at the time of the Budget. Employment has not fallen as far as in previous downturns, despite the fact that the overall shock to the economy from the global recession has been greater, and the claimant count currently stands at about 5 per cent., compared with peaks of about 10 per cent. in the 1980s and 1990s.

We need to do more, however. Previous recessions left deep scars, as those hit by long-term unemployment found it hard to get work even once the economy started growing again. In the 1990s, youth unemployment in particular kept rising for more than a year after the recession finished, and in the 1980s it rose for more than four years after the recession ended. At times, 350,000 young people were on the dole for more than a year.

To prevent the recession from leaving permanent scars that could damage young people for many years, we believe that more, not less, help is needed as we move into recovery. We are setting out extra help for young people who have been most heavily affected by the recession. We already provide extra support for young people from day one of their claim, but we will now deliver a youth guarantee of work or training for every young person who has been on the dole for six months.

To deliver that support, we will fund an extra 100,000 youth job and training opportunities, on top of the 300,000 extra youth opportunities we are already funding this year and next. Young people will be required to take up the help on offer as a condition of receiving benefit. That help will include expanding the future jobs fund, which is already supporting thousands of people in jobs that are good for them and their communities—sports coaches, housing officers and jobs in child care and energy efficiency. More jobs are planned, including hundreds of new jobs working with the police in the Met, jobs in the NHS, and jobs developing the national cycle network across the country.

For 16 to 17-year-olds, we are making available further funding to subsidise 5,000 additional apprenticeship places, so that more young people can get invaluable

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work experience under their belt. We expect youth unemployment to keep increasing in the new year, but our aim is to work with employers across the country, who also need to do their bit to get the youth claimant count falling. We aim to get it falling in the second half of next year.

Older workers also need extra help, so we are announcing today plans to provide tailored support for the over-50s, including help to tackle age discrimination. We will also provide more help for those experiencing repeated short spells of unemployment and expand help from private sector recruitment agencies for professional workers. We also know that lots of people want to start their own business, so we will provide more help and advice to do so from day one of becoming unemployed, with a self-employment credit available from three months of unemployment.

Ninety per cent. of those on jobseeker's allowance still leave it within 12 months, but for those who become long-term unemployed we are rolling out the innovative flexible new deal through which specialist providers deliver personal help, paid by their results. We will trial new ways to incentivise providers to help the hardest to reach, to ensure that contracts can be delivered in a way that is good value for the taxpayer as well. We are also determined to keep up the pace on welfare reform to pursue our long-term goal of full employment.

This recession has not seen the big increase in inactivity that we saw in the '80s and '90s, when the number of people on long-term sickness benefits trebled. Today, the number of people on inactive benefits is about 375,000 lower than in 1997. Many people still need help with skills, finding child care or getting health support to ensure that they can work. Programmes such as the new deal for lone parents and pathways are already providing wide-ranging help to get people back to work. However, we want to go further, not just to help people into jobs but to support them into sustainable employment where they can progress up the skills ladder and balance work and family life.

We will do more to fund travel and child care costs for jobseekers in part-time training and through jobcentres and outreach workers in schools to promote flexible and part-time opportunities for parents and carers. We are reforming and extending the work choice and access to work schemes, and introducing mental health co-ordinators to help thousands of people with mental health conditions back into employment.

We are also setting out further measures to improve skills opportunities, including skills accounts and a single joint budget to help the unemployed between my Department and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. With greater support come greater responsibilities, so from next year we are extending the new work capability assessment for those currently on incapacity benefit. We are also extending jobseeking requirements to lone parents with children aged over seven, but we want to go further, so we will also bring forward requirements for partners of benefit claimants to seek employment.

We are bringing forward a comprehensive package to help people back to work, but we also need to ensure that people are better off in work. The introduction of the national minimum wage and tax credits means that most people see significant gains from moving into work, but we believe that it is right that work should be properly rewarded, so it is now time to introduce a guarantee that people are better off in work. In the longer term, we believe that that could be done through further significant benefit reform, such as a single working age benefit, but in the meantime we will introduce a new better off in work credit, which will guarantee that everyone who moves into work after being on benefit for six months or more will be at least £40 a week better off. We are also increasing the help for carers and parents who can work only for fewer than 16 hours because of their family responsibilities.

The housing benefit consultation also includes proposals to let people keep their full housing benefit payments for three months after moving into work and for setting fixed awards for up to six months to remove some of the uncertainty that comes with going back to work. We are also consulting on removing some of the highest rents [illegible] distorting the system in a way that is unfair.

[illegible]r than expected unemployment is already saving around £10 billion over the next five years on benefit spending alone, compared with Budget plans. It has also saved money within the £5 billion budget for helping people back to work, as fewer people than expected have reached six or 12 months' unemployment, where the more intensive help is on offer. Those savings now allow us to spend £400 million over the next 18 months—£300 million of it on the young unemployed—to support today's announcements. That investment is helping families across Britain at a difficult time. It is also supporting young people at the very start of their working lives, keeping up welfare reform at a time when it is more important than ever, and helping the public finances. This Government believe that we need to help people at a tough time. We will not turn our backs on people who lose their jobs. We will keep supporting them, not just in the recession, but in the recovery.

The White Paper and the housing benefit consultation set out a comprehensive package to help people back to work and ensure that they are better off in work. It sets out the next stage of benefit and welfare reform in pursuit of our goal to get 1 million more people in employment over the next five years. I commend this statement to the House.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of her statement.

At a time when nearly 2.5 million people are unemployed, and when we have record youth unemployment and a record level of economic inactivity, it is right that every effort should be made to provide help and support to get people back into work or trained and ready for work when the recovery comes. But today's flagship White Paper from Labour, coming as it does nearly two years after unemployment started rising, is little more than a restatement of previous policies.

Of course, some of those policies are very familiar to us, because they are our policies. More help for young people after six months; flexible employment programmes that give people support based on their needs, not what benefit they are on; reform of pathways to work—all are Conservative policies. Others, of course, are reannouncements of Government policies. A review of housing benefit was first announced in the Budget in 2008 and was due for publication in the first half of 2009. Perhaps the Secretary of State needed time to consider the U-turn that she has now performed on the

removal of the £15 payment for people who found lower than average rents. We welcome that move, but does the right hon. Lady agree that, far from setting out far-reaching reform of housing benefit, many of the measures in the consultation simply serve to reverse the mistakes made by the Government's first attempt at reform with the local housing allowance?

Speaking of the local housing allowance, the impact of the Government's decision to pay the money directly to the tenant has been families with increased rent arrears and landlords pulling out of the whole system. Indeed, the British Property Federation has said today that an alarming 55.5 per cent. of landlords who responded to a survey that it conducted stated that

"they now refuse to take on LHA tenants due to fears of rent arrears."

Why will the Government not adopt our policy of letting tenants choose whether the allowance is paid to them or directly to the landlord?

Other policies reannounced today include tougher measures to require the partners of benefit claimants to look for work. That was first announced in a Green Paper in the summer of 2008, then in a White Paper this time last year. It has now been announced yet again in this White Paper. A national roll-out of the better off in work credit was announced in the pre-Budget report, but it was first promised in 2008, and it was due to be introduced in 2009. Now we see from the White Paper that the credit is to be introduced in one region from October 2010, and that it is expected to be available nationally from 2011. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that represents a delay of two years for the introduction of the better off in work credit?

The need for that credit is an admission of failure for the Government, who have been insisting for the past 12 years that people are already better off in work. Will the Secretary of State finally admit that, under Labour, people can still be better off on benefits? Will she confirm that the in-work credit will last for six months and that, after that, those who have received it will once again be worse off in work? Will she also confirm that the increased payment to lone parents in work will be only a trial, and that it will not be available nationally?

Far from improving work incentives, the Prime Minister has made them worse during the recession. Will the Secretary of State confirm that figures hidden in the pre-Budget report reveal that the number of low-income families facing marginal tax rates of over 90 per cent. will have more than doubled during the recession?

I welcome today's focus on youth unemployment, but does the right hon. Lady agree that the Government are acting on this too late, when nearly 1 million young people are already unemployed? We have pledged to create 400,000 more apprenticeships, training places and work pairings over two years for young people who are out of work, so I welcome the fact that the Government have adopted our approach, and that there is a focus on training and apprenticeships in the White Paper. However, the Government have been downgrading apprenticeships to a level 2 qualification. Will the Secretary of State tell us how many of the new places being created will be apprenticeships at level 3?

In October, we pledged to give all young people real support after six months unemployment, so I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has finally worked out that young people need more help sooner to get into work. We called on her just last week to offer more help for young people after six months, but she refused to do so; the extra help would come after 10 months. Now, however, she has announced that the youth guarantee will be delivered after six months' unemployment, and that young people will be required to take up the help on offer as a condition of receiving benefit.

However, in describing the new young person's guarantee, the White Paper states that if someone is still unemployed after six months, they will be offered a job, training or internship, and will be required to take it up

"before they complete ten months on JSA."

So, for some young people, the extra help will still only come after 10 months. Which is correct: the Secretary of State's statement or the White Paper? Or is this just another piece of spin designed to gain a headline? For a Government who promised "real help now", it is not good enough that their flagship policy on youth unemployment will kick in almost two years after the recession began and unemployment first began to rise. Perhaps they were so slow to respond because the Prime Minister still believes that he has abolished youth unemployment.

We have heard some good ideas today—many of them our own—but yet again when we look at the detail we see that they are not big bold plans for reform; they are yet more consultations, pilots and pathfinders. As ever with this Labour Government, we have to judge them on what they do, not on what they say. Youth unemployment is at a record high. One in five young people cannot find a job. Eight million people are economically inactive—another record high. More children are growing up in workless households here than anywhere else in Europe. Now, in the dying days of this Government, they are rushing out a series of policy announcements aimed at grabbing votes as the election looms.

The Labour Government have had 12 years in which to introduce radical welfare reform. They have failed. Why should anyone believe that they will do as they say, when they have done nothing to deal with these problems for so long? The people paying the price are the millions who have been trapped in benefit dependency for years. Their children are growing up in poverty. Their health is suffering. Their self esteem has fallen away. That is the greatest moral failure of this Labour Government, and we will never let them forget it.

Yvette Cooper: The kind response to that would be to suggest that the right hon. Lady does not understand her own policies—and certainly does not understand ours. Let me deal in turn with the points that she raised.

The right hon. Lady talked about the level of youth unemployment. The youth claimant count for Great Britain in October was 462,000. In October 1992, in the last recession, it was 784,000. In October 1985, it was 980,000—more than twice as many young people on the dole as there are today. She says that we should judge her not on what she says, but on what she does, and we would certainly judge the Conservative party on what it did over 18 years in government.

The right hon. Lady said that we are introducing Conservative policies on youth unemployment. Until September, she did not have any policies on youth unemployment. It was only when her noble Friend

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Lord Freud came up with a few that she had any policies at all. Even at that point, what was her policy for young people who have been unemployed for more than six months? It was not a guarantee of jobs or training—not at all. All she was offering was a bit of private sector help for young people. We are offering guaranteed jobs or training or work, but she would not fund that. She would not support our £5 billion additional investment.

The right hon. Lady's policy is to oppose and abolish the future jobs fund, which is delivering more than 120,000 job opportunities for young people right across the country. The Conservative party wants to say to those 120,000 young people, "That's it; your job's gone." This Government are increasing the support we give to young people, not just from day one but throughout a young person's experience of unemployment or inactivity. We believe that they should have more support; we believe that they should have more help; and we are prepared to put more investment into it.

We are prepared to put more investment into offering young people education and training places—for example, through the September guarantee, which is again something that the Conservative party opposes. The Conservatives oppose the extra investment in education and training places; they oppose the job opportunities; they want to turn their backs once again on young people right across the country because they simply do not care enough to be prepared to invest money that is a saving for the future.

The right hon. Lady also talked about the housing benefit measures. I did not hear her welcome proposals to include run-ons, for example, for people on housing benefit who are moving into work. I had hoped that she would support those proposals. We have said that there should be greater choice for tenants, so that their money may be paid to landlords, but we want to consult on whether there should be additional requirements, for example, on landlords to improve the condition of their properties as part of that. For the vast majority of tenants it is a good thing to have their money paid to them directly, as it increases their independence, but we want to look at how we can improve the private rented sector as well.

Let me respond to the points raised about whether people are better off in work. The right hon. Lady will have seen—I hope—from the information that we have put out today that we have already given people big increases in additional support. For a family with one child and one earner in full-time work, the weekly minimum income guaranteed as a result of Government support and the minimum wage has gone up from £182 a week to £309 a week—a 28 per cent. increase. For a couple over 25 in full-time work with no children, the amount has gone up from £117 to £234 —a 50 per cent. real-terms increase.

That is a substantial increase in support for people moving into work, through things such as the minimum wage, which the Conservative party opposed; through tax credits, which the Conservative party opposed; and through additional support for people. We think it right to ensure that there is a guarantee—a nice, clear, simple way of supporting people so that everyone is £40 a week better off. That is on top of the additional support that the Chancellor announced this week for free school meals, which helps in particular families who are concerned about in-work costs.

I have set out today measures that expand support for young people and older people who are unemployed. They are designed to help tackle the unemployment problems that we face, but also to bring unemployment down further and faster than in previous recessions. We believe that active Governments should take such action rather than adopting the approach of the Conservatives, who want to roll back big government, leave people to sink or swim and abandon people to their fate, just as they did in the 1980s and 1990s. We will not allow that to happen again.

Hazel Blears (Salford) (Lab): My right hon. Friend's statement will be warmly welcomed in Salford, where we are only too well aware of the real effects of Tory party policies. In the early 1990s, a whole generation was consigned to the scrapheap as a result of those policies.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the measures she has announced will ensure continued support for companies such as B4Box in Salford, which is led by an inspirational woman entrepreneur, and which is providing construction skills and real jobs for a range of young people who would never normally have those chances? It is that enterprise and innovation that these measures will support.

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend is right. She has talked to me, and to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform, about the company in her constituency which is doing such great work to support young people and give them opportunities. Providing that start in life and that step on the career ladder involves providing training as well as work experience. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be happy to visit my right hon. Friend's constituency.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for providing me with a copy of her statement. It is a bit of a shopping list, but there are some good things on that shopping list. I am pleased that lone parents may be able to keep more of the wages that they are paid for small part-time jobs. We need to end the dichotomy between work and non-work: there are now far more grey areas, and the encouragement that the statement provides is welcome.

I welcome the small increase in the carer's earnings allowance. It is probably not enough, but it is a step in the right direction. I also welcome the exploration of fixed housing benefit awards, which must be worth considering, and the U-turn on local housing allowance, an issue that I raised last week during Question Time. It is good that the Government have thought again.

In relation to in-work benefits, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) raised the significant issue of what would happen after the six-month period. I accept that there will be transitional costs and the early costs of a new job, but I worry about what will happen after six months to someone whose mortgage or rent payments simply cannot be afforded on a modest wage. Will the Secretary of State tell us what she envisages? I understand that there have been pilots. What happened

after six months to the people who could not then afford their mortgage payments, and do we need a more sustained way of helping people?

The White Paper proposes that lone parents who are training can receive income support in the summer, but the Welfare Reform Act 2009 provided for the abolition of income support. I am a little hazy about how the two fit together.

The Government are extending the work capability assessment to incapacity benefit recipients. In my view, it is currently having a very damaging effect on people receiving employment and support allowance, many of whom are being shunted on to jobseeker's allowance when they are not fit for work. The rate at which people are being transferred is much higher than was projected. What appraisal have the Government carried out of the current effect of the assessment, before applying it to a whole new group? I think that the issue will be filling all our postbags in the coming months and years if we do not get it right.

As for the issue of high housing benefit for people in high-rent areas, I can see that this makes a bad newspaper headline, but if—especially in London—people in high-rent areas are shunted into low-rent areas, is there not a risk that family networks that can provide child care will be broken up, that children will be moved from their existing schools, and that ghettoes will be created when everyone in temporary accommodation ends up in bits of London where the rents are cheap? Is that really a good by-product of policy?

Are we doing enough at the outset for the high-risk youth unemployed? Is it not the case that on day one of a claim it is possible to identify the high-risk groups, those with no qualifications and those in high-unemployment areas? In such cases, could we not intervene more intensively on day one?

The White Paper talks of doing more to in jobcentres match people with family-friendly jobs. Many people say to me "When I went to the jobcentre I expected the staff to help me to find a job, but all that they said was 'There's the internet'." Is there not a gap between the rhetoric and the reality? It would be great to think that Jobcentre Plus will match people carefully with jobs and family-friendly employers, but is it not the case that they are having enough trouble just keeping up with the paperwork? Is there the necessary resource for us to do the good things that the Secretary of State wants to do?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I shall try to respond to each of his questions. I am grateful for his points on the carer's allowance and the support provided for people working for small numbers of hours. As we know, a lot of people cannot work for more than 16 hours, particularly those in families with caring responsibilities, and it is better for them to be able to work than not to be working, even if they can only work a small number of hours.

In terms of what happens after six months in respect of the back-to-work credit, the evidence suggests that people do not drop out of work after the credit finishes—in any case, the vast majority of people are significantly better off in work. The addition of the credit not only guarantees that they will be £40 a week better off, but it gives them the clear and simple message that they will be better off by that amount when they might be concerned about housing benefit or the interaction between different benefits, which can be difficult to understand. This credit gives people the simple message that they will be £40 a week better off, and it allows them to get back into work so that they can build their confidence and understand that, in the future, they will still be better off in work than unemployed.

The hon. Gentleman's point about mortgages is important. Some people will find themselves with unsustainable mortgages, perhaps taken out before the credit crunch began. For those people, we want to ensure that there is long-term help, if possible to get them back into a job that pays them enough to maintain their mortgage payments, but if not, to provide support to them via some of the mortgage rescue schemes or via housing associations and other bodies, so that we ensure that they have sustainable long-term housing finance as well. That matter obviously raises a wider range of issues to consider.

Under the Welfare Reform Bill it is possible to remove income support, but that is not our intention at this time, because we need it for precisely the reasons the hon. Gentleman mentioned. We think there is a case for providing a single working age benefit and for undertaking much wider benefit reform in the future, but such reform must be undertaken in stages, which is why we are making individual changes through measures such as the reform of housing benefit.

The hon. Gentleman raised concerns about the work capability assessment. We are reviewing it and we have been working on that with expert stakeholders and medical professionals. We are also closely monitoring the appeals process. We believe that some sensible changes and modifications can be made to the work capability assessment, and discussions on this issue are ongoing.

In the White Paper, we refer to the additional assistance that we want to provide to those people on jobseeker's allowance who may be able to work but who may also have health conditions and therefore need some additional support in that context even though they are able to take up employment and work as well. We will want to consider that possibility as part of a review of the pathways programme.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the high sums of housing benefit and about high rents in some areas. We think it is right to look at the possibility of excluding the highest proportion of rents from the calculations. The rent officers used to do that under the old local reference rent scheme: they used to exclude some of both the highest and the lowest rents when working out their calculations. There is a second issue to consider: because of the wide areas within which the local housing allowance applies, the average in an area can be raised by the presence of some very high cost and expensive properties in certain neighbourhoods, and that ends up having an impact on nearby neighbourhoods. We think it is possible to exclude some of the highest rents that are distorting the system and leading to unfairness without jeopardising the existence of mixed communities, because it is right that we continue to support decent housing in mixed communities across London and many of our areas.

The hon. Gentleman asked about what more we can do from the very first day of unemployment. Jobcentre Plus trials will be starting in his area and several others to give jobcentre advisers precisely the flexibility he was talking about, so that they are able to consider people

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very much as individuals in respect of what help they need and whether they should be fast-tracked to particular forms of support or additional help. Those trials will consider how we can enable jobcentres to work more flexibly. Jobcentres have done a fantastic job in the difficult period of the last 12 months by not only responding to the very big increase in the number of people coming through their doors, but helping people and getting people back into work and paying benefits on time. We should pay tribute to the immense amount of hard work done by many of the people in our jobcentres, and we want to give them more support so that they can do a better and more flexible job in future as well.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North) (Lab): When my right hon. Friend is judging people by what they do and not what they say, will she recall what happened to apprenticeships in the 1980s, who abolished the old wages councils and who pursued poverty pay? May I particularly welcome the announcements that she has made today on housing benefit run-on and the carer's allowance, both of which have been strong recommendations of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions in the past and, thus, are even more relevant and important? I welcome her announcement on the extension to the youth guarantee, but can she tell the House how many jobs have so far been filled through local employment partnerships?

Yvette Cooper: I believe that the local employment partnerships are filling more than 30,000 jobs a month. I cannot recall, off the top of my head, the cumulative figure for the LEPs, but they have certainly helped far more people into work than we expected them to do, which is why we have provided them with some additional support and funding so that they can expand their work. They are working closely with employers, and providing people with additional targeted training has been very successful. My hon. Friend is also right to say that apprenticeships had been pretty much killed off before 1997, since when there has been a big increase in their number, with more than 230,000 people starting apprenticeships in the past year. Apprenticeships are a good opportunity for young people to receive training as well as work experience.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As someone who welcomes anything that can tackle the big problem of unemployment, may I ask the Secretary of State to give me her estimate of how many additional unsubsidised sustainable jobs there will be in 18 months' time if the Government spend this £400 million?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman is asking for the number of unsubsidised jobs there will be, and one of the things that we are doing through the future jobs fund is to subsidise employment for young people, because we think that that is the right thing to do. So of that £400 million, £300 million is helping not only to expand things such as the future jobs fund—that deals with the subsidised jobs—but to deliver additional targeted training to get young people back into work. The overall level of employment in the economy and the number of jobs that exist will depend not simply on our work to help people into work, but on the wider work to support the economy. It has been estimated that the measures that we have taken to support the economy, for example, the wider fiscal stimulus, and the support provided through the Bank of England and quantitative easing, have helped to prevent the loss of up to 500,000 jobs as a result of the recession. We need to keep supporting the economy, rather than to cut back on support for the economy and for jobs, as his party is proposing right now, in the middle of the recession.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): I, too, welcome the three month run-on for housing benefit, because it is important in letting people settle down into jobs before there is any threat of their having their benefit taken from them. Did not my right hon. Friend say something in the White Paper about discussion as to whether housing benefit can be paid directly to landlords? I have been in correspondence with one of her colleagues about a local citizens advice bureau and the eviction of some of its clients because they have chaotic lifestyles. They are drug addicts and they have been pleading for their housing benefit to be paid straight to their landlord. I would welcome such an approach.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I know that she and others on the Select Committee have been examining this issue. Clearly it ought to be possible already for those with the most chaotic lifestyles to have their housing benefit paid directly to their landlord. We will be issuing new guidance very shortly to make that clearer for local authorities, although they should be doing more of this already. As part of the document, we are also consulting on giving tenants a wider choice and to be able to have their rent paid directly to their landlords if they so choose. It is important that the choice should lie with the tenant, not simply with the landlord because that has been an important way of empowering tenants and giving them more choice, as opposed to simply paying the money directly to landlords. The other thing on which we want to consult as part of this proposal is whether there should be any conditions on the landlord where rents are paid directly to them. Such conditions could relate, for example, to the quality or the energy efficiency of the property, and we would like to seek people's views on whether that is the right thing to do.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): One of the aspects of this recession is that employers have learned to retain older, skilled workers so that they are still in work when there is an upturn in the market. Concomitant to that has been the fact that they have not been so willing and/or able to take on new, younger staff—school leavers and others. Will the Secretary of State explain what the future job fund offers to employers in the private sector? How can they access the fund to enable them to employ younger people so that its application does not simply lead to a further burgeoning of the public sector? I am sure that the Secretary of State will understand that many local authorities up and down the country are going through the difficult task of having to consider their staff levels against the current economic background, and it is very difficult for them to explain to their staff that they are simultaneously taking on people through the future jobs fund while trying to slim down the existing labour force in local government.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the impact on young people. He asked how private sector employers can benefit, and they can do so in a series of ways because it is not just about the support provided through the future jobs fund, but the additional support that is available for apprenticeships, via Train to Gain, recruitment subsidies and internships, if employers can offer them. For a lot of private sector employers, this is the opportunity to take on the talent of the future—to get talented people and to train them up. That is good for business as well as good for those young people.

We are also asking all employers, through the backing young Britain campaign, to see what they can do. Some might work with other partners through the future jobs fund, but others might simply offer a graduate internship for six months, for example. We can provide additional support and help when internships can be offered. Employers could even simply act as mentors to young people, and could perhaps give them just a couple of weeks of work experience, too. The backing young Britain website provides a range of ways in which employers can also get more information and support through Jobcentre Plus and other agencies to help them to help young people.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): I agree that tenants should have the choice on housing benefit, but what worries me is the young people who leave school very early—the under-achievers—and drift into drugs, alcoholism and crime. They are left for perhaps six months to wander the streets. They worry me—I see them in my constituency, as all other Members will in theirs—because they are the ones who get into trouble and end up in a hostel and sometimes in prison. What can we do for them?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that it is that small minority of people who can be most vulnerable and who also need the greatest support. It is often vital that agencies and organisations work together to help them, otherwise they slip through the net. Today, we are publishing a revised strategy to help young people, particularly 16, 17 and 18-year-olds, in exactly those circumstances. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to that. We are also keen for jobcentres to work more closely with other agencies that provide both family support and support for those young people, so that the jobcentre does not simply start to work when somebody reaches 18; jobcentres can do their bit to help provide employment support or skills advice, where appropriate, for 16-year-olds.

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): The £40 in-work guarantee sounds very positive, but does that not still leave an issue with the marginal tax rate being about 85 per cent. when they move beyond the £40? Should we be considering the minimum wage as part of the answer?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the minimum wage is established by the Low Pay Commission, which considers every year how the national minimum wage can be increased. The national minimum wage has been an important part of ensuring that people are better off in work. As a result of the changes to things such as the tax credits, we have, over the past 10 to 12 years, reduced the number of people facing the very highest marginal deduction rates, which occurs when there are complex interactions between different benefits. That is also one reason why we think that the long-term approach will include measures such as simplifying housing benefit and considering how to apply it better in future, for example through a housing tax credit or different approaches to a single working age benefit. A further impact of that is ensuring not only that people are better off, but that they get continued support. If all support was immediately withdrawn once people moved into work, although they would be able to work more hours and see their income increase with every hour that they worked, they might lose the substantial additional support that we think it is right to give to people on low incomes. Such people, especially those with families, should have additional support, and there should also be extra support for their children.

The issue is important, but we have done a lot to reduce the number of people facing the highest marginal deduction rates. The long-term approach to the issue should be through such measures as major benefit and tax reform.

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North) (Lab): Given that we reformed housing benefit for private tenants with the introduction of housing allowances to enable those tenants to make the kind of housing choices that the rest of us take for granted, although we should recognise that there will always be a small minority who do not pay their rent on time and therefore have a facility to deal with that, can we be careful that we do not re-reform housing benefit purely in the landlord's interest, as the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) requests, and that we use housing allowance as a way out of benefit dependency and towards greater freedom and empowerment?

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. The issue is extremely important, which is why we are consulting on how we should proceed. There are some cases in which it would be easier for tenants to have their rent paid directly to their landlords, but equally, in the vast majority of cases, we think that it is much better for rent to be paid to tenants so that they have the financial power to take decisions themselves. It is important that decisions and reforms are taken forward in the interests of tenants, rather than simply as a response to things for which landlords have asked. Tenants are at the centre of these reforms.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The overall level of unemployment has not risen as much as the Government expected, which is a good thing, but the level of youth unemployment has risen by more than they expected, which is a bad thing. The Secretary of State confirmed today that she anticipates that that rate will carry on rising beyond the date of the general election. What led the Government to underestimate the recession's impact on young people?

Yvette Cooper: I do not think that that is accurate. The Budget forecasts earlier this year reflected independent forecasts at the time, and the average of those independent forecasts suggested that the overall rate of unemployment would be about 400,000 higher than it is today. As a result, and to anticipate that, we ensured that there was additional funding in place to help as many people as possible back to work. We said from the very beginning, however, that additional help needed to be provided for

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young people, especially. Historically, young people have always been those who are more affected by recessions, especially because they are the people who are trying to find a new job at a time when employers have cut back on recruitment. That was why we introduced the future jobs fund, and we talked about £1 billion of additional support for young people at the time of the Budget exactly because we wanted to ensure that extra help would be available for them.

The figures, including the Independent Labour Organisation measure, show that about 12 per cent. of the youth population who were not full-time students were unemployed in the 1990s, while the figure was 13 per cent. in the 1980s. The current proportion of the youth population who are unemployed and not in full-time education is 9 per cent. I think that the expansion of higher education and places for 16 to 17-year-olds has been important but, of course, the hon. Gentleman is right that there is much more that we need to do.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that Lord McKenzie of Luton came to my constituency to look at the fantastic partnership work going on between the retail sector, the further education sector and her Department that has helped keep down the pressures on youth unemployment. May I ask her to tweak things just a little more by making her Department a little more customer focused? An example of the present lack of flexibility is that people required to undertake their six-month interview are asked to go, not to their nearest jobcentre, but to one structured for the convenience of the jobcentre. Tiny changes like that would make a massive difference to customers.

Yvette Cooper: I am happy to look into the points that my hon. Friend makes about having that flexibility for the customer, and he is also right to point to the partnerships between Jobcentre Plus and other agencies and employers. Major employers have got involved, especially in the retail, leisure and other sectors, and they are working to provide pre-employment training that the jobcentre will fund. That helps people secure a first interview who might not get the chance otherwise, and it also helps them to get the training that gets them into work. That partnership work is making a difference, and helping a lot of people avoid the kind of long-term unemployment that they might have experienced in previous recessions.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Tens of thousands of people have been made redundant in the past three years, many of them having been employed by large multinationals. Will the training opportunities outlined by the right hon. Lady today target getting self-employed people into the small and medium-sized enterprise sector? If so, young people might at least have a greater opportunity to get sustainable employment than has been the case in the past.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to support job growth, for which SMEs may be crucial over the next four or five years. We are also setting out proposals today to make it easier for people who want to start their own businesses. They will be able to get additional advice and support on starting up a business from the very first day that they become unemployed, and a self-employment credit of £50 a week will be available for them once they reach three months of unemployment. In that way, people who have ideas, initiative and an understanding of what they want to do will get the support that they need to get started. That will be good for them and their businesses, and for the economy as well.

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): When my right hon. Friend is reflecting on actions, I trust that she will remember the massive increase in child poverty and the tripling in the number of people on incapacity benefit that were the hallmarks of the last time that the Conservatives had the opportunity to put their words into action. I welcome her contract for young people, but does it extend to Scotland? If so, has she or any of her colleagues had prior discussions with the Scottish Government and other devolved agencies? They will be crucial in the delivery of the contract for young people in Scotland.

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, and she is right too about the number of lone parents, for example, who have got back into work. Levels of employment in that group have increased over the last year, despite the recession, and that is helping children right across the country to get out of poverty. She also asked about Scotland, and I can tell her that the single skills budget is for England. However, the vast majority of the proposals that we have set out today apply in Scotland as well, and the Scotland Office is taking forward discussions on skills with the Scottish Executive, where there are relevant issues with which they need to be involved.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): The future jobs fund has already delivered 144 jobs in my area, so I thank my right hon. Friend for her announcement today of additional support for 16 and 17-year-olds. The current economic climate demands that we support that vulnerable group of citizens, but does she agree that the Opposition's attempts to rewrite history simply add nothing to this important debate, as we have seen in the recent past with other elements of welfare reform?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. This is not just about rewriting history, as we well remember what happened with youth unemployment in particular during the 1980s and 1990s. The problems did not arise only during the recession, as they were also evident during the recovery, when youth unemployment soared. However, the future is more important now, and he mentioned 144 job opportunities that the future jobs fund has delivered in his area. That is 144 people who would have their job taken away if the Conservatives were elected to government.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I very much welcome the announcement today of additional support for young people, carers and parents. My right hon. Friend will be aware that the lack of affordable child care is a real obstacle to many parents entering work. Will she therefore tell me a little more about her proposal to fund travel and child care costs for jobseekers in part-time training? It will be important not only for them, but for ensuring that there is ongoing child care so that, when they get jobs, those jobs are sustainable.

Yvette Cooper: I agree about the importance of child care. We have already done a lot to increase the free child care that is available for three and four-year-olds as part of nursery education, and to develop the child care tax credit and other child care support. As part of the White Paper, we are looking to provide additional child care, travel costs and help for jobseekers in part-time training. Otherwise, they will end up missing out on the chance to train, simply because they cannot get the child care that works for them. We are looking at whether we should develop child care loans for people when they start employment and, for example, have to pay a month's child care costs up front. We are looking at whether we can give additional support in those circumstances. We are also working with the Department for Children, Schools and Families on issues like that, as part of its families Green Paper.

Point of Order

5.26 pm

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Under Standing Order No. 14, the Government are required to name 13 days on which private Members' business has precedence over Government business. Tomorrow the private Members' Bills will be presented, but hon. Members still have no idea on what dates their Second Readings will be. I understand that there is no precedent for that, so could you give some advice to hon. Members about how to get out of that seeming chaos?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I say to the hon. Gentleman that tomorrow is, indeed, the day for the presentation of the balloted private Members' Bills for this Session. The House has not yet ordered the Fridays when such Bills will be debated; a motion is on the Order Paper setting out certain Fridays. It is up to those in charge of Bills to decide when to set them down for Second Reading, taking into account the various possibilities that appear on the Order Paper. I cannot pretend that that is a satisfactory situation for Back Benchers, but I hope that it will be resolved soon after the recess.

BILL PRESENTED

VIDEO RECORDINGS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Siôn Simon, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Ben Bradshaw, Mr. Pat McFadden and Mr. Stephen Timms, presented a Bill to repeal and revive provisions of the Video Recordings Act 1984.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 14) with explanatory notes (Bill 14-EN).

Flood and Water Management Bill

[Relevant Documents: The Sixth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Session 2008-09, on the Draft Flood and Water Management Bill: HC 555-I, and the Government response, Cm 7741.]

Second Reading

5.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), sends his apologies to the House, because he is at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Brussels, where important fisheries negotiations are taking place today. We all wish him well. May I also draw the House's attention to the publication today of the latest progress report on the implementation of Sir Michael Pitt's recommendations?

I thank the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for their pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill that we published in April. The Bill that is now before us has benefited from their thorough and close examination, as well as from more than 650 responses to the public consultation. It is shorter than the original Bill, for reasons that the House will understand, but we remain committed to taking the other measures forward when time allows.

As all too many Members in the Chamber will be aware, the origins of the Bill lie in the devastating floods of 2007. It is never possible to attribute one particular event to our changing climate, but what happened then was a stark reminder of our vulnerability to the force of nature. Important parts of the Bill owe a great deal to Sir Michael Pitt's "lessons learned" report. I am sure that the whole House would wish once again to express its thanks to Sir Michael for the work that he has done. We have responded to many of his recommendations.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I have read the Bill once—I hope that that is sufficient—I cannot see any provision to give the fire and rescue service a statutory duty to deal with flooding, which was one of the Pitt review's recommendations. What do the Government intend to do about that, and when?

Hilary Benn: The Government's view is that it is not necessary for such a duty to be put in legislation because the fire and rescue service already provides a very good service in rescuing people. It has built up capacity. As the House will be aware, we have provided funding and other support to enable it to undertake those duties even better in future. It was not the view of the Government's then adviser, Ken Knight, that such a change was necessary.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The Secretary of State knows that I support the Bill, and I thank him for introducing it. He will have heard the Deputy Speaker talking about the presentation of private Members' Bills tomorrow, and may have seen on today's Order Paper that I will present a Bill to require local councils to take account of Environment Agency objections to building on the flood plain—a highly relevant matter. Will he consider whether that very simple but very necessary measure could be added to this Bill?

Hilary Benn: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will come to that precise point in a little while. He raises an important issue about the way in which we take decisions about planning applications.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): The right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) referred to the fire and rescue service. Will the Secretary of State put on record his thanks for the work that it did in the summer of 2007 and, more particularly, the outstanding work that it has done in recent weeks in Cumbria, backed by a very influential local Member of Parliament?

Hilary Benn: With the greatest of pleasure. I know that I speak for all Members in the House in saying that we are full of admiration and respect for the outstanding work of the fire and rescue service, but also, to be honest, that of everybody who helps out in times of need and emergency. A lot of people owe a great deal to their skill and determination.

Since the summer of 2007, we have completed 106 flood defence schemes protecting more than 63,800 additional homes in England, we have invested £60 million to help to tackle surface water flooding, and some 140,000 more people have signed up to receive flood warnings in England and Wales. In addition, we have set up the new flood forecasting centre—one of Sir Michael's recommendations—which provides a single forecast, including an extreme rainfall alert. During the floods in Cumbria, it played an important role in giving emergency responders early warning of heavy rainfall as well as expert advice on the risk of flooding. Thirty-six hours before the flooding occurred, the flood forecasting centre indicated a high risk of significant property flooding and a danger to life in Cumbria. That shows the benefit of this change.

What we saw in Cumbria reminds us of the devastating effect that flooding has on homes, on businesses, on communities and, above all, on people's lives. Our sympathies go out to all those affected, as do our thanks to all those who responded with such selflessness and determination. Equally impressive has been the tremendous resolve of the communities affected to get back on their feet.

The 2007 floods affected great swathes of the country, as many hon. Members here today know only too well—from Sheffield, Doncaster and Hull to many communities in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, the Thames valley and elsewhere. Thirteen lives were lost, 55,000 homes and businesses were affected, and £3 billion-worth of damage was done. For individuals, businesses and home owners, recovery is not quick. We know from previous flooding that getting back on one's feet can take many long, hard months.

The rainfall in Cumbria was truly exceptional, and that in 2007 very unusual, but this may not be the case in future, as climate change will make what are currently extreme events more frequent. Sea levels are also expected to rise. According to the most recent projections by the UK climate impacts programme, that rise could be 36 cm in London before the end of the century.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): The Secretary of State will know that the source of the River Severn is in my constituency. He mentioned the floods of 2007, many of which were directly related to that river. Does he agree that if the Bill is to be effective, we will have to find ways to mitigate the speed at which water enters the watercourse and comes down the river? To achieve that, we have to find upstream and uphill solutions to increase the absorbency of the mountains. Simply building higher walls will not be the solution.

Hilary Benn: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and one important purpose of the Bill is flood risk management. Of course defences are important, which is why we have been investing more money in building them, but we also need to think about other ways to handle the flow of water.

Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): Further to the point that the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) made, flood alleviation programmes work well upstream in places such as Milton Keynes and Bedford, but create major problems in constituencies such as mine. In effect, a different value is placed on the life of people who live in my constituency from that of people who live upstream. Does the Secretary of State accept that the Bill must ensure that the whole length of the river system is taken into full account, so that everybody has an equal chance of alleviating the flood problems that we suffer from?

Hilary Benn: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and we have catchment flood management plans for precisely that reason. He makes the point that what we do in one place can have a beneficial or negative consequence somewhere else. That is why we have to consider where the water comes from, how it moves and where it ends up, so that we can take the right decisions. Choices have to be made, as I think the House recognises.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): When we are talking about choices, we have to talk about funds as well. Understandably, the majority of funding is directed towards dealing with river and coastal flooding, yet many of our constituents face problems of ground and surface water flooding. How can we get the balance right so that we put in place not only the plans but the funding to make a difference to people's lives?

Hilary Benn: I agree with my hon. Friend. Particularly in Sheffield and Hull but also in many other places, surface water flooding was the problem. That is why one of the purposes of the Bill is to make it absolutely clear for the first time who has lead responsibility for taking account of the matter, which will be unitary or upper-tier authorities. They will bring together all the people responsible for the different drainage systems, private culverts and highways and byways that take water away.

We must ensure that we do not add to the problem. I shall turn presently to sustainable urban drainage, and we have made a practical change to planning permission that does not cost any money. Previously, someone could pave, tarmac and concrete over their front garden without needing to ask anybody. Now they have to apply for planning permission if they use non-permeable paving, but not if they put in place permeable paving. Front gardens tend by definition to drain off into roads. That is a very simple change that we have already put in place at no cost, and it shows that although the solution is about investment, it is also about how we approach the problem. Nobody took responsibility in the past, and if we put the Bill on the statute book we will ensure that somebody has responsibility in future.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Does the Secretary of State believe that local authorities have the resources to enforce that step adequately?

Hilary Benn: From the assessment that we have made, to which I shall turn in a moment, we are certainly confident that the transfer of responsibility for private sewers to the water companies, which we intend to put in place, will free up resources. I will be perfectly frank and say that we need to have a discussion with local authorities about funding in the medium to long term, and I undertake that we will do that to ensure that the costs are fully funded.

Two weeks ago we awarded £11 million to 15 local authorities for pathfinder schemes to help them deal with coastal change. They are in the best position to understand what is needed, and the projects will support a range of activities from the creation of new sand dunes and the building of boardwalks to buy-to-let schemes for properties at risk and land purchase for rebuilding.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that what happens in one area can affect another, but under the Bill there will be separate flood management strategies for England and Wales. Clause 8(3) states:

"The Welsh Ministers must consult the Secretary of State"

on such strategies

"so far as the strategy may affect...England."

Will the Secretary of State say more about how he would adjudicate what is right or wrong? Tewkesbury is very much affected by what happens in Wales.

Hilary Benn: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point. The holder of my office will have responsibility for trying to weigh up proposals. In the end, what we are seeking to do with this legislation—one of the other purposes of these changes—is to get all parties that have an interest in and responsibilities for such things, including duties placed upon them by the Bill, to work together. As we have already heard in interventions from Members on both sides of the Chamber, what one body does has an impact elsewhere and what happens in one place has an impact elsewhere. The Bill is constructed to ensure that people come together and work co-operatively.

Christopher Fraser: The Environment Agency has justified its position on where it puts flood alleviation schemes in economic terms, confirming that it is complying with the Treasury's Green Book. It states:

"Current Government policy for investment in flood defences favours densely populated areas over rural and agricultural areas and at the moment it does not take account of, for example, future food security".

Is that fair?

Hilary Benn: It is certainly true that a formula is used to make a judgment about where the priorities are. That is a combination of where people live and the economic impact. The House and the nation could have a different set of priorities, but even with the additional investment that we are putting in, choices have to be made on where we are going to spend money. As we know, in the east of the country, coastal erosion is a natural process that has been going on for thousands of years.

Lembit Öpik: On that point, does the Secretary of State nevertheless agree that it would not be a sensible strategy explicitly to aim to flood large swathes of, for instance, Montgomeryshire, to protect downstream towns—in other words, to cause problems upstream that are just as expensive and damaging as those downstream? If he can assure me that the Government will not embark on such an insane strategy, I promise not to interrupt him again.

Hilary Benn: That is a very generous offer. The hon. Gentleman illustrates the point that the House acknowledges, namely, that there are choices. I have seen for myself a really good washland scheme protecting Lincoln. When there are high levels of rainfall, the water is diverted into a farmer's fields, with his agreement, and it comes out two, three or four days later. It works well. When I asked the farmer, he told me that the type of crops he grows can cope. It all depends on the circumstances, but there is not always an easy answer to such choices.

Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness) (Con) *rose—*

Hilary Benn: I am going to make a little bit of progress.

It is precisely because one in six homes in England is already at risk of flooding from rivers, the sea, or indeed surface water, that we cannot move every community away from flood risk. That is why we set out a rigorous test in planning policy statement 25. The expert advice of the Environment Agency on flood risk and new buildings is now followed in 98 per cent. of cases, according to the latest figures that I have. I think that shows that altering the guidance and requiring the agency to be consulted has had an impact.

We can also do more to make individual properties resilient and resistant if the water gets in. A recent example of that was when homes and businesses in Appleby got through the flooding because of the Government grant funding that enabled 46 of them to buy and fit protection equipment. We expect to see more work of that type in future. The Bill defines risk, sensibly, as the combination of likelihood and consequence. The Bill will therefore encourage both resistance and resilience as ways of managing the consequences of flooding. That is important, because where properties are at risk we can also work with the insurance industry so that insurance cover remains widely available. Our agreement on a statement of principles with the Association of British Insurers is intended to do this. The ABI wants to see our record investment in flood defence—£2.15 billion in the current three-year period—and it also expects the Bill to help to overhaul how we better manage the rising risk from flooding. It has urged all of us to work together to ensure that the Bill becomes an Act as quickly as possible.

One of the principal purposes of the Bill is to ensure that organisations know what bit of flood risk they are responsible for managing and that local people know that, too, so part 1 of the Bill will enable a wider range of approaches to flood and coastal erosion risk management and clarify responsibilities for all sources of flooding. The Environment Agency will take a strategic role, including developing a national strategy for flood and coastal erosion risk in England, and a similar role in Wales will be taken by Welsh Ministers. County and unitary authorities will take the lead in ensuring the management of local flood risk and developing plans to deal with it. Resilience and other approaches that minimise the impact of flooding and coastal erosion will be an important part of the plan, and the Bill makes it clear that all authorities can use these as well as, of course, providing flood defences and flood warnings.

Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that his Department will cover all the additional costs that will be incurred as a result of the additional responsibilities that many county councils will take on?

Hilary Benn: As I have already indicated, I will say something in a moment on that very point. I know that it is a source of concern that local authorities have raised.

The lead local authorities will also take on responsibility for surface water flooding, which is a responsibility assigned for the first time in law—for sound reasons that I am sure the House will accept. That is really important, as the Environment Agency estimates that in 2007 two thirds of the 55,000 properties affected were damaged as a result of surface water run-off overloading the drainage system, as opposed to rivers overflowing.

The Bill will encourage all local authorities, the Environment Agency, water companies, internal drainage boards and others to work together in tackling flood risk. Part 1 will introduce duties on those bodies to co-operate and share information and will provide for improved accountability through local authority scrutiny committees.

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): Will the Bill, in its somewhat reduced form, still enable water companies to take the lead on enforcement against illegal connections? Problems in my area are often caused by an illegal connection of clean water to the foul water sewerage system, or vice versa.

Hilary Benn: No, it will not, because we have had to shorten the Bill so that we can get the most important things through.

Part 1 of the Bill also recognises the important role of district councils and internal drainage boards. They will retain their works powers in relation to ordinary watercourses. Part 1 will also place duties on the flood risk management authorities to contribute to sustainable development when managing flood and coastal erosion risk, and regional flood defence committees will have their remit extended to coastal erosion. Schedule 1 to the Bill will give new powers to local authorities, the Environment Agency and internal drainage boards in England and Wales to protect physical features that they do not own, but which can play an important role in flood protection or in avoiding coastal erosion.

Mr. Drew: On the issue of internal drainage boards, I welcome the increased flexibility that the Bill will introduce. Those boards are advantageous because of their localness and their knowledge. If there is any way at all in which we can boost their influence and their ability to deliver, this is the right time to do it. Will my right hon. Friend take that on board?

Hilary Benn: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's comments about the work of the internal drainage boards. Over the summer, we consulted on other changes, as he will be aware, but they are not in the Bill, for the reason that I gave earlier.

Schedule 3 to the Bill will help to manage the risk of surface water flooding by encouraging the construction of sustainable drainage systems—or SUDS, as they are known—for new developments and redevelopments. County and unitary authority approval will be required for the drainage proposed for any new development, and the approving body will then be responsible for maintaining the SUDS on new developments serving more than one property.

All net new burdens on local authorities will be fully funded. As I indicated a moment ago, on funding SUDS maintenance in the long term, we will publish a clear way forward that takes account of the circumstances faced by local authorities and developers, and that will happen in time for the implementation of this Bill. The aim is to reassure local authorities that they can implement SUDS in the knowledge that there will be no gap in funding.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is being generous; I apologise for interrupting his flow. Recommendation 39 in the Pitt review stated:

"The Government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue, with Fire and Rescue Authorities playing a leading role, underpinned as necessary by a statutory duty."

Why has that statutory duty not been included in the Bill?

Hilary Benn: I explained earlier to another hon. Member why that was the case: we do not think it necessary simply because, first, fire and rescue services already provide that function—we saw that during the 2007 and 2009 floods—secondly, because the Government's then adviser, Ken Knight, did not think it necessary, and thirdly, because we have given additional support, finance and training assistance to the fire and rescue service so that it can continue doing the very good job that it does, which is to help people when they are in difficulty.

Local authorities will need to build their skills to carry out these new roles, so we are working closely with local government, professional bodies and training providers, investing more than £1 million to support that effort.

The House will recall the awful moment, during the 2007 flooding, when there were fears that the Ulley reservoir might fail. Schedule 4 will introduce a risk-based approach to reservoir safety to improve the way we handle such matters. I am conscious of the concerns that reservoir owners and users have expressed, but the aim is to provide proportionate regulation that reflects the danger that reservoir failure might pose to human life—that must be the overriding consideration—regardless of the use to which the reservoir is put. In many cases, however, we expect to reduce the regulatory burden.

Part 2 of the Bill will give powers to the Environment Agency, local authorities and internal drainage boards to undertake environmental works related to flood risk that are in the best interests of nature conservation, the preservation of cultural heritage or people's enjoyment of the environment.

A more variable climate has implications not just for flooding. Members will recall the very recent years of drought in the south-east. It is important that we consider how we can manage a shortage of water as well as too much of it. The remainder of part 2 therefore deals with the most important and urgent matters relating to water management. It will enable the Government to review and update water companies' powers to prohibit or restrict certain non-essential domestic uses of water in times of drought. It will also provide for new regulated entities to finance and deliver the very large, or unusual, water infrastructure projects that we might need in the future to address the challenges of climate change and population growth. That will ensure that water customers are protected from new risks associated with the delivery of such projects.

Schedule 5 will amend the special administration regime for the water industry to align it with the general insolvency regime applicable to other companies. The Bill will also fulfil the Government's commitment to legislate to protect community and religious groups and sports clubs from unaffordable rises in their water bills because of unreasonable surface water charges. It will allow water companies to introduce concessionary schemes.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know of my interest in horticultural businesses, as secretary of the gardening and horticulture all-party group, and I declare an interest accordingly. On draught and the problems associated with the last one, would it not be sensible to introduce a code of conduct to protect the industry and gardeners from what was seen last time as a blanket ban? It could, and should, have been a phased ban.

Hilary Benn: I appreciate my hon. Friend's point, and I know of his close interest in the horticultural industry. The purpose of this part of the Bill is to give us clearer powers to do the right thing in the right circumstances. However, I can give him an undertaking that we will wish to consult those affected, as necessary, according to the circumstances.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his Department's excellent work in dealing with usurious charges of water companies against community groups and for the help he has given to churches and scout groups in my constituency. Will he give me an assurance that he will not hesitate to use his powers, under clause 42(5), with regard to water companies that level usurious charges against groups such as the Birch community group in my constituency? That would enable such groups to benefit from the excellent work done by him and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies).

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his kind words, which I echo, about the DEFRA civil servants, and I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who has worked very hard on this matter. Given the united view in the House and country, I find it hard to imagine that water companies will not do as desired. It is not a problem in some cases because there are some sensible schemes in place, but where there have been problems, the Bill will make it clear that there is a solution.

Part 2 of the Bill will abolish the Fisheries Committee in Scotland, ending the duplication of functions and removing an unnecessary burden on business.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hilary Benn: Given that it is the right hon. Gentleman, I shall give way.

Mr. Jack: I am most grateful. Before the Secretary of State moves on to the Scottish Fisheries Committee, may I take him back to the previous point? The affordability issue in respect of certain social activities within our constituencies has been fixed, but the Bill still lacks a response to Anna Walker's report. One issue that continues to trouble people in the field of water is affordability. Will the Secretary of State tell me what steps his Department will take—if necessary, outwith the Bill—together with Ofwat to continue to pursue issues connected with water affordability, particularly in relation to the further development of social tariffs?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. As he will know, we have only just had the final report of Anna Walker's review. There is a great deal for us all to think about, including the Government, and we shall respond in due course. I am acutely conscious of the issue that he raises and the impact that it has on many people, and I shall be happy to talk to him further about how we might pursue the matter, once we have formed a view on what to do.

Part 3 will provide for existing legislation to be amended, by way of secondary legislation, to simplify procedures and standardise provisions within different statutes. That is to pave the way for consolidation and for the single unifying Act for floods legislation that was explicitly recommended by Sir Michael Pitt and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

As Members will be aware, owing to the shortness of this parliamentary Session, it has been necessary to prioritise. However, when taken with the regulations implementing the EU floods directive, the Bill will implement the most important provisions on flooding, including the recommendations of Sir Michael Pitt's report that require legislation.

I am grateful for the broad support expressed for the principles in the Bill, and it will no doubt be carefully scrutinised in Committee. However, the most important thing we can do is to ensure that it proceeds as quickly as possible, so that the House and society can show that we are doing all we can to help to prevent flooding. That is why the Bill matters, and I commend it to the House.

5.59 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The whole House has seen on the television images of flooded landscapes, but as many hon. Members and the Secretary of State know, it is perhaps only when we see for ourselves the devastating effect of flooding on people's homes and businesses that we truly understand its impact. Man takes charge of so much nowadays that it is sobering to see the awesome force of nature that flooding represents.

Nature's power was evident most recently in the flooding in Cumbria. Although it was inspiring to see the emergency services working so effectively, local communities coming together and people helping each other, that flooding was a timely reminder that it remains the primary duty of the state to ensure the security of the public whenever it can. That will increasingly mean ensuring our environmental security, which is ultimately what the Copenhagen summit is all about. Although we must try our best to secure a deal to mitigate greenhouse emissions, our climate is already changing. The adaptation agenda is just as important, as I said in my response to the Gracious Speech.

The Bill is about enhancing our environmental security and adapting to climate change through better flood risk management. Ultimately, it is about protecting people and their homes. We must never forget the human consequences when we fail in that duty. One victim of the 2007 floods said:

> "It was horrendous when the flood arrived. Nobody knew what to do...There was sewage running through the house which caused an awful smell...there was water everywhere, so we had to wade through the street to find somewhere above water."

That experience has been repeated in Cumbria, as hon. Members are only too aware.

Nor must we forget the duty that we owe to help communities to recover from flooding when it occurs. The national media may move on, but communities such as those in Cockermouth, Keswick, Workington and Kendal have only just begun to rebuild their lives and move back into homes and businesses. We must ensure that political attention does not desert them in the months ahead. That is why I will be visiting the affected areas again later this week to meet displaced families who will be out of their homes for Christmas, and I know that the Secretary of State has done the same thing recently.

I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House will want to continue to express their concern for the area, and that we will want to pay tribute to the ongoing clean-up and recovery efforts of local authorities and voluntary organisations, which are working hard to make Christmas bearable for the flood victims. There was unprecedented rainfall in Cumbria, but it is important to recognise the good work of the authorities, especially the Environment Agency, which were better prepared because they had learned the lessons of the Carlisle floods in 2005.

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making some good points, and he is of course welcome in Cumbria. However, does he believe, as I and my Cumbrian colleagues do, that one of the most fundamental answers to the problem is more public money and not less?

Nick Herbert: As the Secretary of State said, difficult choices will no doubt have to be made, but I have said that I believe it to be the first duty of the Government to ensure the security of the people, and that means ensuring their environmental security as well. There will be an ongoing need for investment in flood defences at a time when public spending choices will be difficult, and I think that the whole House recognises that.

We are at increased risk of flooding. Already one in six homes is at risk, and with climate change this risk will increase. Events such as that seen in Cumbria will become more frequent, as will floods on a larger scale. The most devastating floods were those of summer 2007, which constituted the largest peacetime emergency since the second world war. As the Secretary of State reminded us, 13 people died and more than 55,000 homes and businesses were flooded, at a cost of more than £3 billion. Despite the outstanding response to the Cumbria floods, we need an improved national response to protect families and their homes from flooding, and to better manage floods when they occur.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: My hon. Friend is right to say that the operation in 2007 was the largest in peacetime, but will he speculate on how much worse the situation would have been if the flooding had gone that little bit further and the entire county of Gloucestershire had lost its electricity, which it almost did? That is a measure of how serious the situation was.

Nick Herbert: I take my hon. Friend's point. The Secretary of State alluded to the potentially catastrophic effects if a reservoir had been affected, and the same could be said of the impact on critical infrastructure, including the electricity system. Many of us will remember the images of the emergency services desperately trying to protect the sub-station. That is a lesson for us all, and I want to come to the issue of critical infrastructure in a moment.

The Bill takes forward recommendations from the review into the 2007 floods by Sir Michael Pitt. It is now more than a year since the Pitt review reported, with a comprehensive set of more than 90 recommendations. The Conservative party supported those recommendations and we are glad that we have the opportunity to consider legislation to implement many of them. I have consistently urged the Government to introduce legislation, so we welcome the Flood and Water Management Bill.

All Members will be aware that the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggested that the Government should wait until the opportunity arose to have a comprehensive flood and water Bill. However, my view—and, I think, that of most hon. Members—is that we should not delay implementing essential measures, and the Government were right to bring the Bill forward. The recent floods in Cumbria sealed that view. We will therefore work constructively with the Government to ensure that the Bill is strengthened and reaches the statute book as quickly as possible.

There are some key measures in the Bill that Conservatives have called for and that we will seek to ensure are sufficiently clear and robust. First, the confusing and overlapping roles of central Government, agencies, local authorities and the emergency services, which were evident in the 2007 floods, must be brought to an end. The Chief Fire Officers Association described the "institutional confusion" that beleaguered the recovery effort then. The Pitt review called for people and organisations to be held to account and for simple structures and clear outcomes. We must have clearly defined responsibilities. We therefore welcome the provisions in the Bill to give the Environment Agency strategic oversight and to spell out in law that, in most cases, the lead local flood authority with clear responsibility for flood defence will be a unitary authority or county council. In fact, that is something that the Government first advocated nearly five years ago, in their "Making space for water" document.

We also welcome the measures to improve urban drainage and create requirements for new developments to incorporate sustainable solutions. For too long there have been barriers to establishing such systems, which, as the Conservative party's quality of life review highlighted, have the potential to reduce flood risk from surface water. By requiring new development to focus on permeable paving, ponds and soakaways, we can help to respond to the pressures of climate change, which will lead to more spells of prolonged rainfall.

We also welcome the emphasis on information sharing, so that local flood authorities can better co-ordinate their responses. We will want to ensure greater transparency on flood information, so that local households and businesses get the information that they deserve. We also support the provisions in the Bill on reservoir safety, although we must ensure that they are framed in a way that does not impose unnecessary burdens on owners of small reservoirs, many of which pose no risk to people at all as they are sited on agricultural land. That is an issue that we will need to attend to in Committee.

We broadly support the provisions on infrastructure in part 2 of the Bill that require large projects to be open to competition, which has the potential to help reduce costs to water customers. We are particularly glad to see clause 42, which deals with the problems of charging for surface water drainage—the so-called rain tax—that have caused so much difficulty for scouts, guides, places of worship and other community groups, which were faced with unacceptably high bills. The oversight role of the regulator still needs to be looked at, but overall the proposal is welcome. Back in July, we called on the Government to give companies the discretion that they needed to protect such groups and ensure that new charges were properly monitored by Ofwat. It took Ministers a long time to act, but I am glad to have encouraged them, because they got there in the end and I congratulate them on that.

There are, however, some aspects of the Bill on which we seek clarity from the Government. Some legitimate concerns have been raised by third parties about whether the Bill, in seeking better to co-ordinate the response to flood risk, is too centralising. The National Farmers Union, for instance, has argued that the Environment Agency's role is "power heavy" but "duty light". The Environment Agency gains a strategic oversight role for flood risk management, which is certainly right in principle, but in practice we must ensure that it is framed so as not to sideline local concerns. As the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee argued, a national strategy is important, but it must not come at the expense of

[Nick Herbert]

local knowledge, not least because flooding is, in essence, local. The Committee warned against over-centralising measures, stating:

"We are concerned that the draft Bill establishes a rigid vertical structure, which potentially precludes pragmatic cross-boundary area-based approaches that accommodate local people's views and knowledge."

Flooding is a national concern, but it always impacts locally. That is why, for instance, local drainage boards are so important in harnessing local expertise and concern. It is therefore vital that we get clarity on how the national strategy will be drawn up and on how it will be approved. The Bill requires the Environment Agency to consult widely when drawing up the strategy, and requires the strategy to be laid before Parliament. Democratic oversight of the process will be crucial to public confidence, however, and ensuring accountability for such an important framework will be vital. We would therefore like Ministers to explain more about how they envisage the process of approval working. Will the EFRA Committee be able to scrutinise the strategy before it is agreed, for example?

With regard to how the national strategy is applied, the Government need to be clearer about how it will fit in with local strategies devised by lead flood authorities. The Bill puts a responsibility on local authorities to develop their own local flood strategies, but it also requires those strategies to be consistent with the national strategy. In that case, how much discretion will local authorities have to diverge from the national strategy set by the Environment Agency?

We also want further clarification on the measures in clause 38, which give the Environment Agency the responsibility to weigh up the competing interests of conservation and people's enjoyment of the environment, and the potentially harmful consequences of increased flooding or coastal erosion. That is a difficult balance to strike, but we must ensure that local people are involved throughout the decision-making process and that the process is fully accountable.

We are also keen to consider in more detail schedule 1, which relates to the designation of features that could have a significant effect on flood management. The Bill enables the Environment Agency, a lead local flood authority, a district council or an internal drainage board to designate a structure if they believe that its existence or location affects a flood or coastal erosion risk. Following such a designation, the owner of the feature may not change it without the consent of the responsible authority. It is right that assets that could have a serious impact on flooding should be properly accounted for and managed responsibly, but we need to look closely at the implications of the Bill's drafting. Network Rail, for example, has raised concerns about the designation of its assets, and we will be keen to ensure that proportionality is maintained so that this process does not become complex or costly, and that an appeals procedure is in place.

Beyond concerns over where the Bill might prove too centralising, we also seek clarity on the costs arising from certain provisions. We will seek more details from the Government of the costs that will fall on local authorities in taking on their new responsibilities, because that is worrying them. With council finances stretched, local authorities will need reassurance that additional duties can be afforded without increasing the burden on council tax payers.

Similarly, we have questions on how the additional cost of maintaining sustainable urban drainage systems will be met. Ministers have said:

"We recognise that longer term funding must be in place from around 2018, and are considering a number of options to address the funding of SUDS maintenance in the long term."

They have also said:

"The Department will ensure that any increased costs to local authorities are fully funded to avoid upward pressure on council tax."

Despite assurances that medium-term costs will be covered by plans to transfer private sewers to water companies, it is by no means clear that that is the case. The Local Government Association has said that these assumptions are based on seven-year-old data from only 12 per cent. of local authorities, and so are hardly reliable. The provisions might also lead to water companies being hit twice: once for the cost of the sewer transfer and again for the long-term costs of maintaining sustainable urban drainage systems. These are sensible proposals to help to manage the risk of flooding posed by surface water drainage, but in the current economic climate, the Government need to give more detail on how they will be funded, rather than simply relying on historical and incomplete data, and on potential solutions that might emerge in the future.

We welcome this legislation, but, in some respects, it does not go far enough. It will fall to a future Government to bring forward further legislation to cover those aspects that have not made it into this Bill. It was clear from the draft Bill, when it was published in April, that Ministers originally intended to legislate for elements of the Cave and Walker reviews into competition and affordability. The consultation paper said:

"The UK Government and Welsh Assembly Government will each assess"

the recommendations of the reviews. It went on:

"Where they believe it necessary to legislate to implement any changes as a result of these reviews they each intend to do so as part of this Bill."

But that has not been possible, not least because the Government started the reviews too late, and have therefore left themselves with no time.

Many of Professor Cave's recommendations on abstraction trading, competition and legal separation will require legislation. Over a year after his interim report, which made a number of recommendations—accepted in full by Ministers—it is disappointing that this rare opportunity to legislate for them is being missed. The recently published Walker report contains a number of recommendations that link directly with the aims of this Bill, particularly the elements relating to efficiency, which could help to change the way people think about their water use and help to reduce the risk of the severe shortages that would require the temporary bans legislated for in the Bill. Referring to the consultation on the draft Bill, DEFRA implied that greater efficiency measures, including duties on companies, could be forthcoming in the Bill, but it will fall to future legislation to introduce them.

The water industry is desperate for measures to tackle the rising problem of water debt, which the whole House should be concerned about. The problem disproportionately

impacts on those low-income families who pay their bills and subsidise non-payers by £12 a year. Simple measures in the Walker report to provide for a named bill payer could have been introduced in this Bill, and would not have unduly slowed its progress or jeopardised the vital flooding measures.

Such confusion firmly underlines the need for a new, joined-up approach to the water industry, which is why we are committed to introducing a White Paper to bring together the Cave and Walker proposals and take the opportunity of the current break in the regulatory cycle to make sensible changes to the way in which water companies are regulated, and put customers at the heart of the industry.

We need to do more between floods, rather than just reacting to them when they happen. Reviewing our natural water flows and cycles, and slowing water down, will help to reduce flood risk. We therefore support calls made by many non-governmental organisations, including WWF, for an approach to flood management that places a much greater focus on the use of natural processes. That can have great benefits, as it can increase the storage capacity of the land and act to slow water down, both of which are important in militating against flooding.

Paddy Tipping: Is that not why the Bill is called the Flood and Water Management Bill, rather than the flood defence Bill? Have the Government not already learned such lessons?

Nick Herbert: I support the Government's measures in this respect, but I shall come in a moment to some of our caveats.

In my constituency, the Pulborough brooks serve as a natural flood defence. The River Arun's flood defences failed earlier this month, but because the brooks have been preserved as a nature reserve managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the water has been allowed to dissipate, keeping it away from residential areas, roads and infrastructure. Systems such as those, reliant on environmental measures, have the added benefit of improving our ecosystems and providing new habitat for wildlife.

Given the connection between natural flood defence, river management and wildlife, I appreciate the concerns of bodies such as WWF and the RSPB when they argue for a greater emphasis on the water framework directive in the Bill. The wildlife trusts have estimated that a greater use of natural systems, alongside hard defences and appropriate development, could save £30 billion by 2080. However, using natural systems to help to alleviate flood risk cannot be code for abandoning coastline communities or for casually allowing productive farmland to be sacrificed, especially without proper consultation. We must protect valuable farmland.

Mark Simmonds: My hon. Friend is making a fundamental point. In my constituency in Lincolnshire, a significant percentage of the agricultural land is either grade 1 or grade 2, yet some of it might be left to go back to the sea. That would have a detrimental impact on productivity yields, and on the levels of food that can be produced in this country for consumption in this country.

Nick Herbert: I agree with my hon. Friend's concern. As food security becomes more important to us, we must remember that allowing the degradation of important coastal flood defences will have an impact on coastal communities and result in the loss of highly productive farmland. That is a huge issue to the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association and a matter of concern to local communities. We will want to probe that issue further as the legislation develops.

We must protect valuable farmland and continue to find innovative ways of managing coastal erosion. Consistent with our belief in devolving power, more autonomy should be given to allow coastal communities to defend against the sea when they can. I recently saw the work at Bawdsey in Suffolk, where landowners donated farmland to a specially formed trust, which in turn sold the land for housing, raising £2.2 million to fund the strategically important new sea defence. Thanks to Suffolk Coastal district council, which was supportive, the project was successfully completed earlier this year at relatively low cost, defending a headland that in turn protects many hundreds of acres of farmland. That is a good example of a local scheme in action, and we will need to see more of them.

As I have said, despite the impressive response in Cumbria, this legislation is essential.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I want to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's Canute-like stance on this issue and ask him to set limits to this extraordinary attempt to defy the natural processes. We will have to surrender land to the sea on the east coast—there is no alternative strategy in some cases—and we really must be more honest with some of our citizens who may think otherwise for perfectly understandable personal reasons.

Nick Herbert: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman talk to the communities concerned and put that point of view to them. Their belief is that not enough is being done to protect communities, their houses or farmland and that more could be done at relatively low cost if communities were empowered to take such decisions themselves. I believe that we should take those decisions seriously. Above all, people feel that they are not properly consulted on decisions taken about the maintenance of coastal flood defences and they want to be involved in those decisions and empowered to protect themselves if possible.

Christopher Fraser: Does my hon. Friend agree that there are exceptions for constituencies such as mine, which suffer from coastal erosion, and for parts of the fens, which are below sea level and suffer from flood alleviation programmes upstream? Does he accept that constituencies such as mine do not yet want to be rotten boroughs?

Nick Herbert: I am sure that my hon. Friend would not wish to represent a rotten borough. It is true that decisions taken about whether to defend one bit of coastline or to let the defences go have an impact not just on the communities affected but further downstream or down the coastline. That shows the importance of adopting an integrated approach, but I am arguing that we need to be more respectful of local communities in taking such decisions.

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In making communities more resilient to flooding, we cannot rely solely on legislation. Indeed, the majority of the Pitt recommendations do not require legislation. Some, such as the proposal for a strategic, long-term approach to investment in flood risk management, need political will. As the Pitt review said:

"Change will only happen with strong and more effective leadership across the board."

On the issue of critical infrastructure, which my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) raised with me, the Government have been too slow in taking forward Pitt's recommendations to protect such infrastructure from future flooding, so as to ensure that essential utilities are not at risk during times of floods as they were in 2007. Despite being one of Pitt's urgent interim recommendations, a national emergency framework produced to provide information for all tiers of government is not now due until summer next year. The natural hazards team was established only in May this year. Today's progress report on Pitt, which the Secretary of State has just published, lists 171 at-risk sites, but perhaps he will tell us when he winds up when he expects the full audit of critical infrastructure to be completed.

Many of us also have concerns about ongoing construction in areas at risk of flooding. It simply cannot make sense that one in 10 new homes are being built within areas of "high flood risk". We need some foresight by planners and sense from developers, and we must be certain that sufficient flood prevention and flood mitigation measures are in place if any development is to take place in flood risk areas. None of that requires legislation, but it does require sustained attention and focus from government at all levels. The sobering fact is that a year after the 2007 floods, almost 5,000 households were still in temporary accommodation, living in caravans or on the top floor of their homes.

The work of the National Flood Forum in helping communities and raising awareness has been invaluable, and its recent work highlighting the problems of victims of floods or those in at-risk areas in obtaining insurance helped to draw attention to that other significant problem. We must ensure that, when the spotlight turns off an area affected by flooding, the work continues.

Mr. Drew: Does the hon. Gentleman understand the dilemma when a community is waiting for a strategic plan to be put in place and measures to be introduced, as there is not much of an incentive for them to build in their own resilience? The dilemma is that sometimes the cost-benefit analysis may not bear out all the physical work, so all we end up doing is putting people at greater risk in the future without that built-in resilience. Is that not a message that we should all put forward?

Nick Herbert: The hon. Gentleman is talking a great deal of sense. I was simply making the point that, if at all possible, we need to get people back into their homes quickly and not lose focus on those issues. After all the attention given to the floods of 2007 and to the Cumbria floods, I fear that there is a risk that, as the House moves on, we forget that hundreds—and in the case of Cumbria, thousands—of people are still unable to live in their homes. I am simply arguing that we need a concerted attempt to get them back into their homes as soon as possible, which is a matter not for legislation but for effective action.

The need for legislation reveals something of a paradox. Climate change is affecting our weather patterns and we can expect a future where our winters will be wetter, with increased river flows and higher sea levels. That will lead to more extreme weather and more flood events. At the same time, we will see more water shortages as demand on this precious resource grows. Not only is it essential to ensure our communities are more resilient to flooding so that we can cope better when we have too much water, but we must all start to conserve and value water more so that we can adapt to the reality of having less of it. That calls for better management of water at every level.

As we look to improve the Bill in the weeks ahead, we must ensure that we are making it easier for people to manage water. Frequently, that will mean allowing local communities to use their local knowledge and expertise to minimise flood risk. By its nature, water is difficult to manage and defending against flooding can be expensive. With huge pressure on resources in the years ahead, difficult decisions will need to be taken. Sometimes it will mean ensuring that adequate hard defences are in place to provide security for the long term.

At the invitation of the Environment Agency, I recently visited the Thames barrier to see the excellent work that goes on in protecting this capital from flooding. When the designers originally agreed the project in the 1960s, future rising river levels were anticipated, so it was deliberately over-engineered. As river levels have risen, barrier closures have increased through the decades. The barrier was closed four times in the 1980s and 75 times in the current decade. That is a testament to British engineering skill and planning foresight, and on latest estimates the barrier should keep London safe until at least 2070.

The barrier is also a symbol, however, of the growing threat from flooding and of defence and the foresight we need to help protect our communities. We have a duty to ensure this country's environmental security and this Bill is a sensible step in that direction.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I remind hon. Members that the 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches applies from now.

6.28 pm

Mr. Elliot Morley (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I would like to add my welcome to this Bill, which is an important measure that follows on from a series of reports published after severe flood events going right back to the late '90s. I remember being involved in the 2000 floods and in the Carlisle floods, where my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) played a distinguished role, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) during the recent floods in his area.

While it is certainly true that one extreme does not prove a climate change, what we have seen is an increase in the number of extreme events in this country and an increase in periods of severe rainfall. It is certainly the

case that the percentage of properties flooded by surface water run-off seems to have increased. In that context, I think that the Select Committee's report, along with the Pitt report and the Bill, makes very sensible proposals.

In general, floods have been dealt with very efficiently. That is not to say that there is no room for improvement, and it is not to say that there has not been some confusion, particularly over who is responsible for non-main water courses and for surface flooding. I know that the Select Committee has considered that issue before, and it is addressed in the Bill. There has been a much more enlightened move towards a range of options in regard to flood and water defence.

We have already discussed "soft defence". I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) was saying that a future Conservative Government might divert money from people's homes and properties to defend farmland. There will of course be choices to be made about the allocation of budgets, but that does not mean that farmland cannot be used to defend people.

My constituency contains Alkborough Flats, Europe's largest managed retreat. The land was bought by the Environment Agency, but it is still farmed by the local farmer and his work force. It is designed to flood once in 20 years in the event of a surge down the Humber, the Trent and the Ouse. The crops would be lost in that particular year, but in the meantime it can operate productively. In the Ancholme valley in my constituency, where there is a serious flooding problem, the Environment Agency proposes that farmers should unite. It is possible that their crops will be flooded every few years, but they could receive compensation in those years. Various formulas could enable them not only to continue to operate commercially, but to play their own role in flood defence.

Mark Simmonds: The right hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise the importance of appropriate managed retreats—there is one at Freiston Shore in my constituency, which he has visited—but is he aware that many farmers do not think there is enough emphasis on the importance of protecting grade 1 and grade 2 agricultural land for our food production?

Mr. Morley: I have heard all the arguments. Farmers in my constituency make similar points. It is a question of balance, is it not? It must be said, in all fairness, that there have been changes in farming practice over the decades. In some instances, there has been a move away from sustainable traditional farming, particularly in wash lands and water meadows where there used to be summer grazing, towards extensive drainage pumping and a shift to monoculture. All that, incidentally, has taken place at public expense: all those pumps and drains were financed by the taxpayer. But a balance must be struck between sustainable agriculture—the importance of food production—and sustainable flood management, and I believe that the Bill paves the way for that. There are issues that it needs to address further, but it is a welcome step forward.

Surface water was a major problem in my constituency in 2007, when there was extensive flooding in the town of Kirton in Lindsey. Let me record my appreciation for the funds that the Government provided for recovery following those floods. The additional funds for North Lincolnshire council enabled it to increase the number of drains, to replace inadequate drains, and to install a proper outlet in the surface water drains at the bottom of the hill, where the town is. That could not have been done without those extra funds from the Government.

There are people on North Lincolnshire council with experience of flood management, but there are not many of them, and they are nearing retirement age. I agree with the suggestion by the Local Government Association that if local authorities are to play a more proactive role in flood management and flood planning—which I strongly support—there will have to be some support for skills, so that there are people to deal with surveys, flood risk assessments and engineering advice. My council had to bring in consultants to handle some of the technical problems, and it would be much better if that could be done in-house.

I do not have a strong opinion on two-tier councils. My local authority is unitary and therefore has responsibility for these matters, and I think that that works very well. However, where there are two-tier councils I believe that district councils need to be involved as much as possible, not least because they are the planning authorities and planning cannot be divorced from flood management. That will require some thought.

I am pleased to note the commitment given to sustainable urban drainage, of which I have always been a great supporter. I have seen one or two schemes around the country, and I think that they work very well. I believe that it is possible to gain environmental enhancements from SUDS. They can make an area look nice: green space can be used, soak-away areas can serve as paths or cycleways, there can be ponds, and there can be all sorts of different designs. There is, however, the issue of who pays for the maintenance, and it is one of the issues that have blocked the development of SUDS.

It was a great step forward to create a committee to approve and supervise SUDS, but I am still not clear about who will pay for their upkeep. There are various options, but the issue will need to be clarified in Committee. One suggestion is that those with SUDS will not have to pay drainage charges to the water companies, but someone will have to pay for the upkeep in one way or another, whether it is the water companies—which have the advantage of maintenance skills—local authorities or developers.

Along with others, I warmly welcome the clause that deals with the question of lower drainage charges for community groups, which has been raised by many Members and in the all-party parliamentary group on water, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) and I are both members. I am glad that the Government have responded and are dealing with the problem. The Scunthorpe bridge club, which has tremendous support from the community—it is an ideal community group—recently moved into a former factory with a large car-parking area, and received a very large bill for drainage. Community groups are not really in a position to deal with bills like that.

There are many omissions from the Bill, but I understand the reasons for that. I am glad that it has been presented, and that it is being given its Second Reading now so that it can be included in the business programme. I know how difficult it is to secure slots in the programme,

[Mr. Morley]

and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has done very well to ensure that it has reached this stage so early.

I know that it is impossible to produce a comprehensive Bill dealing with a number of controversial issues in a short period, but there is one issue that I hope my right hon. Friend will consider: the issue of water bill arrears. It would be possible to introduce fairly simple changes to give water companies the right to know where people had moved to so that they could pursue arrears. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said that the Conservatives would support such a move, so it is clearly not controversial. I do not think it right for the arrears of people who can pay, but will not pay, to be added to the bills of the majority of water customers. A simple measure allowing water companies to track down customers who could pay but have not done so would be very welcome.

Overall, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the Bill. I also welcome the report of the Select Committee, which went into the issues in great detail. I believe that these measures will help flood and coastal management. Although it is impossible ever to stop floods, it is certainly possible to minimise the risk.

It is also impossible ever to stop coastal erosion, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) observed, people should not be misled by suggestions that it is possible to defend the whole of our coastline. Not only, in some cases, is it not cost-effective—we should not duck that issue—but in some cases there is no technical solution, and we must recognise that. Instead, we should be working with coastal local authorities and communities and looking at how we can minimise the impact on them. Sadly, however, that does not necessarily mean there is a solution for every part of our coastline; we should be honest about that.

I greatly welcome the Bill, and I hope that it receives support from both sides of the House and enjoys a speedy passage through its Committee stage.

6.40 pm

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): My test of the Flood and Water Management Bill is whether it will help Warden Hill. It is important and right to sympathise with people in Cumbria, to remember the loss of life and to celebrate the extraordinary response of the emergency services, volunteers, friends and neighbours to both the recent floods and previous ones. We all share those sentiments. However, the real test for this Bill is whether all the strategic overviews and lead responsibilities—the national risk management strategies and flood risk management functions—will actually deliver for people in Gloucestershire, Cumbria, Yorkshire and all the other parts of the country that have now experienced severe flooding not only from river flooding but from surface and ground water flooding, or that now face increased flood risk.

We must make no mistake about this: the risk will increase. The Secretary of State has been in Copenhagen, pressing, I hope, for a tough deal to tackle global climate change. We should all thank him and other delegates from all over the world, and wish them well in their efforts and hope that they succeed, but tough deal or not, we have to face up to the reality of the effects of climate change that are already locked into the system. Scientific evidence to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is clear. It says:

> "Basic theory, climate model simulations and empirical evidence all confirm that warmer climates, owing to increased water vapour, lead to more intense precipitation events even when the total annual precipitation is reduced slightly, and with prospects for even stronger events when the overall precipitation amounts increase. The warmer climate therefore increases risks of both drought—where it is not raining—and floods—where it is".

With the world struggling to limit rises in global temperature to 2°, it is clear why our Environment Agency has concluded that flood events currently expected once every 100 years could be happening once every three years by the end of this century. Let us imagine the events at Cockermouth, Tewkesbury, Hull, or even Cheltenham with its 600 flooded properties, repeated in town after town, year after year, and the strain that that will put on residents, the emergency services, local authorities and those responsible for critical infrastructure, as well as on insurance companies, water companies and the Government's flood alleviation programme, and therefore on the bills, premiums and taxes we will all have to pay. The 2007 floods alone cost the United Kingdom £3 billion; the cost to the economy of much more frequent flooding would be unimaginably high. It is absolutely critical, therefore, that in the time we have available now, before the situation reaches that level of perpetual crisis, we sort out all the problems that have been highlighted by the extreme flooding events of recent years—and not just flooding, of course, but droughts, water shortages and coastal erosion from tides and storm surges.

In tackling all these issues, it is essential that we work with nature, not against it, and I have to say that I share other hon. Members' concerns that the Conservative approach set out by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) sounded rather Canute-like in its defiance of natural forces.

Nick Herbert: For the benefit of the hon. Gentleman and other Members who have commented on my remarks, let me explain that I said that there was an opportunity for locally conceived schemes at lower cost that could defend coastal communities, and I gave the example of one in Suffolk. Does the hon. Gentleman think that that community, which took action that would otherwise not have been taken, behaved in a Canute-like manner? If it had not taken that action, the result would have been loss of farmland and other such consequences.

Martin Horwood: I obviously welcome local action to defend communities against flooding, but that was not the tenor of the hon. Gentleman's overall comments. He was clearly suggesting that trying to work with nature and not against it was the wrong approach. That was my impression, and, I think, the impression of other Members.

Mr. Jack: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Horwood: Not on that point, I am afraid.

The natural environment can be our ally, and our tutor, in providing more space for water, better flood risk management, more intelligent planning, more cost-effective strategies and more secure supplies, and in the process we should take the opportunity to enhance and defend native species and landscapes and biodiversity, and serve a wider environmental agenda.

The residents of Warden Hill do not just want less water flooding into their streets and houses and more flood defences—although I should thank Cheltenham borough council for the funding it has managed to obtain for those that are currently planned. Residents want affordable water and insurance bills, a pleasant and sustainable natural environment around them, and future development that does not make their problems worse and necessitate even more expensive flood defences in future, diverting increasingly precious taxpayers' money from other services. Ideally, they also want a bit more warning next time.

How much does this Bill contribute to all these objectives? We might think that after two and a half years of multiple reviews and consultations, extensive pre-legislative scrutiny and expert advice, we would have a truly outstanding and comprehensive piece of legislation—a veritable torrent of good ideas. Sadly, however, what we have in this water Bill is more of a trickle than a torrent. It is flowing in the right direction, but there is not much of a current. It is not big enough or strong enough to tackle many of the problems highlighted by the events of the last few years. It is better than nothing after such a long wait, but it is still a disappointment.

Let us not be churlish, however. The Bill does helpfully define a flood as an event in which

"land not normally covered by water becomes covered by water."

Well, phew, at least we have covered that one. As many hon. Members have mentioned, clause 42 rightly addresses the issue of the rain tax and community groups such as scout groups. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs claimed that as a Conservative win, but I have to say that I do not remember him spotting this any more than the rest of us did when area-based charging was first introduced. This loophole was, in effect, highlighted as a result of a very bad bit of implementation by one water company. Members on both sides of the House supported this revision, and the clause is most welcome.

The Bill takes forward some ideas from the Pitt review. We have national oversight—a "buck stops here" responsibility—for the Environment Agency. We have local lead responsibility for local authorities. Both of these measures are welcome, but although I noted the Secretary of State's brave claim that all new net burdens on local authorities would be fully funded, back in the real world it is far from clear how exactly these provisions are to be resourced, and whether the Bill will truly sort out the bewildering tangle of responsibilities that surfaced in the floods. These are issues that the Bill Committee must explore in a lot more detail.

The issue of the maintenance of watercourses, drains and sewers has been raised time and again by local residents in many Members' constituencies, and certainly in mine. In particular, we should explore whether the linked issue of unadopted sewers is being adequately addressed. Cheltenham resident Bridget Sansom e-mailed me saying that

"during the summer of 2007 floods, there was a backflow of sewage via the washing machine into the kitchen. This is the result of unadopted sewerage and still has not been solved two years on."

She asked for my "comments, support and help." Let me start by asking about the Government's current plan for the water companies to adopt private sewers. Has that been properly accounted for? The Government recently claimed that water bills in many areas would be going down by a few pounds per household, yet the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs impact assessment on sewer transfer predicted a cost to water companies for that transfer ranging from £4 to £12 per household, and this is not included in the price review 2009 figures. This will more than offset the decrease in water bills that was claimed. So which is the truth? Are water bills going up and not down, or are the Government planning to dodge this crucial issue?

The Bill talks a lot about risk management, but the definitions appear quite limited on first reading. There is, for instance, no explicit reference to risks associated with critical infrastructure. This was a particular issue in Gloucestershire, where the loss of the Mythe water treatment works to the floods meant the loss of fresh water to thousands of people for up to two weeks, and where the absolutely catastrophic loss of electricity supply—not just, as my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) pointed out, to Gloucestershire, but to more than 500,000 people, and as far away as Wales—was only narrowly averted by the quick, co-ordinated action of gold command, Gloucestershire constabulary and the Army and other emergency services. I must declare a personal interest here, as my wife was a member of gold command.

A key Pitt recommendation was that we address this issue of critical infrastructure and, with some prescience, it referred not only to power and fresh water but to transport infrastructure. I am sure that the people of Cumbria, who have lost road and other communications, would agree with that. Pitt's recommendation 53 stated:

"A specific duty should be placed on economic regulators to build resilience in the critical infrastructure."

The Secretary of State has issued guidance on this issue to the regulators and yet more consultation is promised, but guidance and consultation have been issued before—as long ago as 2004—and we were still terribly exposed in 2007 and again in 2009. Work is being done to address the specific risks in Gloucestershire, and that is very much appreciated—such work may well be done in Cumbria too—but we need to consider whether or not the legal duty that Pitt recommended is necessary to protect the rest of the country and whether or not the Government are, once again, using consultation as a substitute for action.

We must also consider the personal cost. I am talking not only about the trauma and disruption of having flood water destroy and pollute one's home or business, and the human impact of homelessness and lost possessions, after the flood water has gone and the property has been replaced or repaired, the insurance will need renewing. One of my constituents found that not only had his insurance premiums skyrocketed but the excess for flood damage had risen from £50 to £5,000. I have heard figures as high as £20,000 cited by others and in some cases flooding has been excluded as a risk altogether. That is not really insurance in the sense of a collective scheme to pool risk and protect all of us from extreme events. What added insult to injury in my constituent's case was that since the floods the Environment Agency had spent thousands erecting a flood wall to the rear of his property, protecting him and his neighbours from a repeat of the event that flooded their houses in 2007. The insurance issues were resolved in that case, but it raises a number of questions.

[Martin Horwood]

First, should insurance take account of work, either at household or local level, that has reduced the risk of flooding? Secondly, should insurance companies be allowed to claim that they are insuring almost everyone and then impose such punitive premiums, excess charges or exclusions that they render someone's policy virtually useless? It makes good business sense to sell well-targeted insurance to those at almost no risk and very little insurance to those at any risk, but that has a high social cost. In a previous decade, some insurance companies used to exclude people who had taken an HIV test. As happened then, do we not now need a collective solution that takes account of a social need? Do we not, thus, need a solution that excludes from insurance only those at a genuinely very high risk of repeated flooding where no steps have been taken to defend them or their property, and that supports the good principle of shared risk for everyone else?

Mr. Laurence Robertson: Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that insurance companies should not be increasing the premium to the extent that they are doing and increasing the excess? As he rightly points out, if the excess is as much as £10,000 or £15,000, people are, in effect, not insured. They are going to pay for the damage in any case, so why does the premium have to go up too?

Martin Horwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. These companies are getting a double benefit, especially if flood defences have, in the meantime, reduced any risk of the flood being repeated.

Mr. Drew: I complete a triumvirate of Gloucestershire MPs. One of the other problems here is the myth that somebody can shop around elsewhere for insurance cover. We all know of examples where people have been flooded and although their existing insurance company has stayed with them—of course, putting the premium up as it does so—no other insurance company would ever touch them. Such people are entirely reliant on that remaining insurance company, which can be deleterious to their position.

Martin Horwood: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and the situation he describes reinforces the need for some kind of intervention in the market. All these steps make business sense for individual insurance companies—in a sense, they are only doing what businesses do naturally—but we clearly need to find a better collective solution.

The last question that all this raises is what is the long-term plan for those who really cannot be defended against flood, coastal erosion or natural hazard. In fairness, I could not possibly suggest that the insurance industry and its other customers continue to pick up the tab for properties that we now realise are not going to be viable in the long term, but are their occupants simply to be left uninsured with a property of collapsing value? My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has been a tireless champion of the rights of people placed unexpectedly in this kind of situation from faster than expected coastal erosion in his constituency. As the Secretary of State has mentioned, an innovative approach to householders at long-term risk will now be tried there and elsewhere in which householders sell and lease back their homes. My hon. Friend seems to have secured social justice for his constituents, with the support now of the Government and of the Environment Agency, but what about other people's constituents who are facing unexpected long-term risk and who are not on the coast? On that issue, as on the others I have mentioned relating to insurance and household risk, the Bill is silent.

Another way in which individual risk could be reduced and the insurance bill minimised is through a better, faster and much more specific system of flood alerts. The Government have instituted the new flood forecasting centre, which is an impressive office in Clerkenwell, bringing together expert skills from the Environment Agency and the Met Office. That is a very impressive start, but the Met Office's modelling and tracking of rainfall is advancing in leaps and bounds and can now predict very heavy rainfall on a very localised basis, down to a resolution of just 1 km. The current flood alert system is based on much broader, generalised flood alerts, delivered—as I remember from 2007—for days in advance. They are obviously a good thing, but a much more specific and targeted warning, even a few hours or less before a localised high rainfall event, would give people vital minutes in which to save their personal possessions. I would like to hear the Secretary of State's views on flood alerts and on whether or not the Bill should include a mandate for a much more ambitious scheme that could save individual property and save us collectively millions of pounds.

May I also ask whether other Government policies are not actually making the situation worse? Let us return to my Warden Hill test. I have in my possession a flood catchment study map that clearly shows the contribution that nearby green fields in Leckhampton make to the retention of water in the landscape. Expensive flood defences are being built in Warden Hill, but how crazy would it be to build on those green fields and create an even greater flood risk all over again? Yet after a local visit lasting only a few minutes, Government inspectors included precisely that area in the Communities Secretary's proposed changes to the draft south-west regional spatial strategy and earmarked it for thousands of houses. My neighbour, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury, will know that in Tewkesbury, which is not far away from the area I am discussing, a whole new housing estate at Wheatpieces has already been given the green light in a very high flood risk area.

In a parliamentary answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin), confirmed that 135,000 dwellings have been built in flood risk areas in the past 10 years. According to the Campaign to Protect Rural England, across the country 27,000 hectares of green belt land is at risk of development. By definition, such land is right next to urban areas, and years ago the Foresight study rightly identified creeping urbanisation as a key factor in increasing flood risk. In one of his less robust moments, Sir Michael Pitt suggested that the current planning guidance, planning policy statement 25, should be maintained but kept under review.

We need to go much further than that, because PPS25 is hopelessly site-specific. The Environment Agency is often placated by a balancing pond here or there, and even when it does maintain opposition to a development,

its advice is often ignored or overturned. We need to introduce planning policies that are created by local authorities working together, with the involvement of local people, including farmers—not by regional quangos. We need policies that address water issues on a landscape scale and with real force in planning law. The sustainable drainage provisions in the Bill are welcome, but they are wholly inadequate to deal with the scale of problem we face. As the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pointed out, the piecemeal approach in the Bill is simply not ambitious enough and the connected issue of spatial planning must be addressed.

Mr. Todd: The hon. Gentleman is touching on a subject that I have addressed in the past: whether or not the Environment Agency should, in effect, be given the powers that the Highways Agency has in relation to planning applications that have a bearing on a highway for which it is responsible. Where it objects, the application may not be determined; it cannot simply be placed before the local authority for a decision. Would a similar power, admittedly one backed up by a rather more robust Environment Agency—I have concerns about the firmness with which inappropriate developments are resisted in my own area—not be a helpful addition to the armoury?

Martin Horwood: The hon. Gentleman raises a very interesting point. The interlocking responsibilities and the right of appeal against decisions by national authorities such as the Environment Agency and the Highways Agency are important. There is an important emphasis, however, to be placed on local decision making and local formulation of these policies, too, and that is what I am trying to express.

Landscape-scale planning policies developed at a local level could include targets for the protection and restoration of water channels, rivers and wetlands. They could help to defend prime agricultural land for local food production, which has been mentioned several times already, for biodiversity and for landscape features such as moorlands and ancient forests. They could make a really important contribution to upstream management of water in the landscape, working with nature, as my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik), who is no longer in his place, rightly pointed out in an earlier intervention. Such a radical change to planning law would obviously require more thought and, yes, more consultation, so it would be challenging to incorporate it into this rather limited little Bill.

At the very least, the Bill could give local authorities clear powers, robust enough to be defended at planning appeals, to stop new developments in flood risk areas that they believe would contribute to flood risk. If they choose to give the go-ahead to buildings in flood risk areas, they need the power to impose planning conditions to increase resilience. We have a code for sustainable homes, but why is it still possible to build houses on flood plains with power sockets in the skirting boards? That is just one small example of how we have failed to make even quite simple, limited changes that are necessary. Incidentally, amendments to that code to enforce water efficiency and rainwater use are also long overdue.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I am glad that my hon. Friend is mentioning this point. Not only should we not build in places that will increase flood risk but, if we are going to build in an area that is likely to have a propensity to flood, it makes sense to design buildings that are resilient. Sometimes, only a minimal change is needed—a few extra feet added to the base structure, for instance, can make an enormous difference to the resilience of a building. For heaven's sake, they knew that in prehistoric times. The lake village in Meare in Somerset records knowledge of how to build on wetland and not have a flooded house. Why have we forgotten?

Martin Horwood: I knew that my hon. Friend had long experience of such matters, but I did not realise that it went back quite that far. He is absolutely right to identify this issue. We know from long-held experience that we should build sensibly, and we seem to have abandoned that needlessly. The Association of British Insurers predicts that, unless Government policy changes, a third of the 3 million new homes that the government wants to see by 2010 will be built on flood plains and:

"Hundreds of thousands of homes could be uninsurable and uninhabitable".

The toxic combination of inaction on planning and inaction on insurance could create a lethal cocktail. The Government's hope that somehow voluntary agreements and the goodwill of the insurance industry are adequate to deal with this threat is just not good enough.

More is also left out of the Bill. It is a water management Bill as well as a flood Bill, but with spectacularly unjoined-up timing, it seems to have missed the opportunity to address the issues of either the Cave or Walker reviews, and it is too late to influence the water pricing regime or water companies' plans now being put in place until 2015. It contains no reform of Ofwat's remit, which is badly needed.

To be fair to Ofwat, it did not write its remit. It is a scary leftover from the high water mark of Thatcherism, when the only sustainability that counted was commercial and the interests of the consumer were regarded as purely economic. Issues such as the environment or social cohesion were simply not part of the equation. Other regulators, such as Ofgem, have already allowed—or been allowed to allow—sensible measures such as social tariffs to help the least well-off customers. It is high time that Ofwat was told to do likewise.

Anna Walker's review rightly pointed out that water poverty was already becoming an issue and that it would become more of an issue if water bills had to rise, if metering became widespread and if the costs of environmental measures such as leakage control and sewage transfer were greater than expected. Walker says that we need

"A package of help...closely targeted on customers with low incomes"

and asks the UK and Welsh Governments to consider updating the guidance to Ofwat. That cannot come soon enough. We do not have to design the whole social tariff system for this Bill, but I hope that it is not too late to, at the very least, change Ofwat's remit to stop it preventing water companies from introducing social tariffs as it does at present. The Secretary of State is looking sceptical, but he should ask the management of Dwr Cymru about their experience of Ofwat in this respect.

Mr. Jack: Given the hon. Gentleman's interest in amending Ofwat's remit, will he be publishing on behalf of his party its contribution to the review of the remit that Ofwat is carrying out?

Martin Horwood: I have put on the record many times my views and those of my party on Ofwat's remit. We have published party policy, which I shall happily send to the right hon. Gentleman.

Ofwat also needs to be told that the environment can no longer be considered a subsidiary responsibility of its economic duties. The economy exists within the environment, not the other way round. We have to learn to live within environmental constraints and an obvious first step would be to break the link between resource use and company profit. It would not be rocket science to design an environmentally-friendly tariff whereby increased water use compared to historical household levels earned the household a higher bill, but the increased revenue went not into the water company's coffers but straight into water efficiency or environmentally friendly water management measures.

All in all, the Bill is a bit of a drip when we needed a good shower. It does take welcome steps in allocating clearer responsibilities and addressing issues of sustainable drainage and flood risk management, but it leaves untouched major issues of insurance, planning and environmental issues that need to be addressed. The emergency services, the Army, the NHS, volunteers, friends and neighbours have all played their parts brilliantly, and I join the Secretary of State and others in thanking them all. However, the time has finally come for us to do our part, too. The residents of Warden Hill and of the rest of Cheltenham, as well as the residents of Gloucestershire, Cumbria, Yorkshire and the rest of the country deserve nothing less.

7.7 pm

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I welcome the Flood and Water Management Bill. I am pleased that it will receive a Second Reading this evening and I hope it is not long before it is on the statute book.

At this moment in time, the eyes of the world are rightly focused on Copenhagen and the world climate change summit. I hope that we can decide on substantial and sustainable reductions on carbon emissions this weekend. I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his excellent ministerial team will do all in their power to get the right deal at Copenhagen.

I am aware that some Members of this House and others outside deny climate change and that others are sceptical about the science. I am not one of them. I accept that climate change is taking place. Instead of having the four seasons of winter, spring, summer and autumn, it seems to me that we are moving towards two prolonged seasons: spring and autumn. That assessment is, I accept, much too general, but we do face climate change.

I agree with the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that we might not be able to blame climate change for the floods that took place in 2007 and for the floods that took place in 2009 in Cumbria. However, unless we address climate change, it is likely that flooding will become a major problem in the future. That is important to me because the most defining geographical features of my Weaver Vale constituency are the River Mersey, the River Weaver and the River Dane, the Bridgewater canal and the Weaver navigation canal.

Water is a significant feature of my constituency, and the old historic town of Northwich has a long history of flooding. In November 2000, we had floods in the town centre where the River Dane and the River Weaver come together. The measures in the Bill will make it more unlikely that we will be visited by floods in the future. I therefore welcome the provisions in the Bill to strengthen flood defences.

It is right that the Government have addressed the proposals brought forward by Sir Michael Pitt following his review of the 2007 floods. Of significant interest is the fact that the Environment Agency is to be given responsibility for developing a national flood and coastal erosion risk management strategy. Dovetailing with that, quite rightly, will be the Bill's requirement that unitary and county councils should take the lead in managing the risk of all locally caused floods, and again I welcome that requirement.

In my constituency, that means that Cheshire West and Chester unitary council and Halton borough council will perform that important task. That is a step in the right direction, and I am confident that Halton borough council will play a full role in developing plans to manage risk for all locally caused floods. I have a word of caution for hon. Members, however, about the new Cheshire West and Chester unitary authority. Sadly, that council has all too quickly developed a reputation for not doing much and not listening to what local people want. Its inaction over the redevelopment of Northwich town centre following the completion of the £35 million Government-funded town stabilisation project is a case in point. I hope, therefore, that the Bill will include measures to enable the Environment Agency and DEFRA to scrutinise the council's progress on its important role of managing floods.

I shall now turn to what has become known as the rain tax aspect of the Bill. I was glad that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said in July that the Conservative party was calling for action on the issue, although I am sure that that was not a result of the ten-minute Bill that I introduced on 12 May. That Bill would have dealt with the problem by exempting places of worship, non-profit-making sports clubs and scout and guide groups from surface water and highway drainage charges, although I should apologise for an error in my drafting because community and village halls clearly should have been included in the Bill's scope as they, too, need to be exempt from the charges.

The introduction by United Utilities of surface area and highway drainage charges signalled a large increase in the water bills faced by scout and guide groups, places of worship, sports clubs, village halls and the like. The changes were introduced following the review by Ofwat of how water companies should charge for surface water drainage. It concluded that the fairest approach was to charge non-household customers based on the size of the site that they occupied, and that charge is called site area charging.

Astonishingly, Ofwat did not examine the impact of the change on voluntary community groups, although it warned water companies that surface area charging might have a negative impact on sensitive properties such as schools, hospitals and places of worship. In general, it warned that water companies would need to take account of the scale and speed of any changes to determine whether they were reasonable and acceptable

to customers. United Utilities took Ofwat's advice by bringing in surface area charging, but it did not take any account of the scale and speed of the changes in charging, and whether they would be reasonable and acceptable to customers.

Following reports in the media of the impact of the changes, it was not long before I was visited by community groups such as churches, sports clubs and scout groups. They had also received representations from their parent organisations warning that the way in which United Utilities had approached the situation would mean that they would be faced with seriously high drainage charges. Before the charges were introduced, such organisations had been granted significant discounts on their water bills because of their charitable status. Their bills had been based on the rateable value of the properties that they occupied, which were either zero-rated or heavily discounted.

I have previously given the House two examples of what has happened, the first of which was that the 1st Halton scout group in my constituency saw its water bill increase by 424 per cent. A church organisation has also had a problem. St. Marks church and Bethesda church, which are part of the Hallwood ecumenical parish in Runcorn, are jointly billed for water. In 2007-08, they did not pay any water rates at all, but in 2008-09 they received a charge of £181.76. That charge was set to rise to approximately £2,000 in 2010-11. The Hallwood ecumenical parish could not afford such a massive increase, so I am pleased that there has been some movement in how the matter will be dealt with. Every pound that such organisations spend on surface water drainage is one pound less for them to spend on the services they provide for their parishioners and members, and the communities they serve. Hon. Members representing all parties have rightly criticised these charges on the Floor of the House. Even Ofwat has joined in the criticism—surprisingly, because it was the author of the change itself.

In early 2009, Ofwat announce that United Utilities had agreed to a one-year moratorium during which surface area charges would be frozen at 2008-09 levels for faith buildings, community sports clubs, scout groups and guide associations. At face value, that measure was greatly to be welcomed, but I was concerned at the time that a one-year moratorium would only delay the implementation of surface area charging and would not result in a change to the charging policy that would be both acceptable and fair to these organisations that serve their communities well.

I was concerned that Ofwat made it clear to United Utilities that it should use the one-year moratorium to work with customers, to communicate the need for the new charges, and to offer advice on how customers could implement environmental improvements that will help them to reduce their costs significantly. It also said that United Utilities would use the moratorium to create a new time frame for the implementation of surface area charging by spreading the remaining charge over a longer period to give customers time to put in place measures to offset future costs and benefit the environment.

On that basis, at the beginning of 2010-11, places of worship, community sports clubs, scout groups, Guide associations and village halls would have been faced with substantially larger bills for drainage. Simply altering the implementation date for surface area charging was not the solution that those organisations were looking for. They wanted a scheme that would put them back in their position prior to the change.

To complicate things—and to make matters worse—Ofwat made it clear to water companies that it would not approve any tariffs for surface area charging that involved cross-subsidies, that were based on rateable values or that involved exemptions. It also instructed all water companies that their tariffs for surface area charging would have to be approved by November 2009. Conversely, it did not say what types of charges, other than surface area charging, would be acceptable.

Throughout the whole exercise, the Government kept a close eye on proceedings. I pay particular tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), who has dealt with the problem fantastically. I was also delighted when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in his party conference speech in late September that he would bring forward measures to address the problem. I therefore welcome the Government's decision to bring forward the Bill, which will give water companies the power to introduce concessionary schemes for surface area drainage charges for amateur sports clubs, scout groups, places of worship and other community groups.

Mr. Jamie Reed: Will my hon. Friend join me—and, I am sure, others in the Chamber—in sending a message to the water companies that if they do not take advantage of the discretion now, they will risk not only driving such organisations into the ground but reducing their customer base?

Mr. Hall: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. I am about to address his point about the water companies' introduction of the concessionary scheme.

I hope that confirmation will be put on record during the wind-ups that the Government envisage that the community groups covered by the Bill will include guide associations and village halls, because it is important that they are included in its provisions.

The Bill could end the unfair rain tax, but it will do so only if it contains a mandatory requirement for the water companies to provide concessionary schemes for surface area water charges for community groups. I understand that the powers on concessionary charging are permissive, not mandatory. I will be looking to the Government to bring forward measures, either by amending the Bill in Committee or through the guidance that will be issued with it, to make it compulsory for water companies to introduce concessionary tariffs for community groups if they want site area charging for surface and highway drainage.

Having established the principle of concessionary charging for surface water, I believe that the Bill will need to go further if it is to achieve its declared aim of getting rid of the rain tax. The Government need to define, either in the Bill or in guidance, what constitutes a fair and affordable charge for drainage so that the concessionary charges will be fair and affordable. The Bill will not achieve its aim of scrapping the rain tax if water companies are permitted to levy unreasonable charges on community groups for surface water drainage. To lock the concessionary scheme into place and ensure

[Mr. Mike Hall]

the compliance of the water companies in getting rid of the rain tax, I believe that Ofwat should be given statutory powers to oversee the implementation of the concessionary charging scheme. That would make Ofwat part of the solution, and stop it being part of the problem.

I want the Government to go one step further. Under the scheme that meant that water bills were calculated on rateable values, scouts and other groups benefited by receiving considerable discounts. I would like the water companies to be given the power once again to offer scouts, guides, places of worship, amateur sports clubs, village halls and other community groups discounts on their surface water drainage bills, over and above any concessionary tariffs that is charged.

This flexibility, which is being called for by the scouting organisations and others, would ensure that the rain tax would really become a thing of the past. Scouts, guides, places of worship, amateur sports clubs, village halls and other community groups would then be able to get on with their primary function of providing top-quality services for their members and the communities that they serve.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to Stella Creasy of the Scouts Association for the excellent work that she and her organisation have done on the important issue of putting an end to the inequitable rain tax.

I commend the measures to the House.

7.21 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): This may well be the last speech that I make on a piece of environmental legislation before I retire at the next election. I have the honour of chairing the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and we have done a number of reports on flooding and the implementation of the Pitt review. We have also been involved in the pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill, so I felt it only right to make a final and modest contribution to this debate.

I am grateful for the kind words from the Secretary of State acknowledging the work that the Committee has done, and I should like to begin by putting on record my appreciation of the work done by the Committee's staff. The Clerks, the inquiry managers and our special advisers are the unsung heroes of parliamentary scrutiny work. They do not get the headlines or the opportunity to speak in debates like this, but pre-legislative scrutiny of the quality that we have been able to achieve would not take place without their efforts.

Perhaps controversially in the light of observations made in the debate so far, our report recommended a delay in introducing this legislation. That was not because we did not want the Environment Agency and others to take on an important co-ordinating role in developing a flood-risk strategy, especially given the failure of the surface water arrangements that was exposed in 2007. We want that strategy to come into force, but our report was a way of putting down a marker. As so many contributions have already suggested, the issue of water cannot easily be disaggregated into a lot of little bits and pieces. As the Secretary of State's own policy document, "Making space for water", acknowledges, all the functions have to be integrated.

For example, we must take account of Anna Walker's review of how water should be paid for, and how we can optimise its use and minimise its waste. We must also heed the other work that has been done on competition in the water industry, and the question of who is responsible for what in any aspect of the management of water. That inevitably means that this is a big and complex matter—as witnessed by the fact that the original Bill had 269 clauses. In contrast, the Bill before us today has been reduced to 49 clauses and four annexes. That is a remarkable piece of editorial activity, and I congratulate the drafters on their achievement.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Mr. Jack: I will give way to my hon. Friend in just a moment. The other reason for the Committee's approach was to put down a marker that made it clear that whoever forms the next Government will have to undertake to return to this matter early in the new Parliament. By that time, the new Government will have had a chance to digest Anna Walker's findings in particular. They will also have had a chance to address the question of affordability, and to learn from debates like this about some of the many issues that have not been touched on.

I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), who is an honourable member of my Committee.

David Taylor: I thank my right hon. Friend, as I shall call him, for giving way. He has been an excellent Chair of the EFRA Committee. Like him, I am standing down at the election and the last few years on his Committee have been very rewarding indeed. Does he recall the visit that the Committee paid to Lyons to look at the integrated approach taken there to flood prevention and management? Is he concerned that one possible flaw in this welcome Bill is that the local authorities that will take on a great deal of the local responsibility for these matters will have inadequate resources, skills or knowledge to be able to do so effectively?

Mr. Jack: My hon. Friend brings me on to two points that I wanted to touch on. The first is that I think that all of us must be honest with ourselves and with the public about what can be afforded, and what cannot. The Secretary of State will no doubt remind the House when he winds up that the Government have increased spending on flood-prevention measures. I think that the total will be £1 billion by 2011, but the Association of British Insurers has suggested that expenditure should be as high has £1.5 billion. When the implementation of the Pitt proposals was costed, Pitt himself indicated that there was an inadequacy of funding.

We must be realistic. In the current circumstances, we cannot, for example, protect everything by means of hard-engineering solutions. One of the outcomes of the work to be done on risk assessment and the development of a strategy should be to fulfil the objective set out in clause 3, where it speaks of

"preparing, gathering and disseminating maps, plans, surveys and other information"

for communities. Communities must be informed about the risks they face. More importantly, they must be informed about what risks can be dealt with—and, more importantly still, what risks cannot be dealt with.

The subject of resilience has already made an appearance in this debate, and quite rightly so. I do not think that we spend enough time on that. One of the most impressive groups of witnesses to come before the Committee came from the National Flood Forum. The forum operates something like a British standard that delineates what equipment works and what does not, but it also has a great deal of experience in giving people in communities guidance on how to make things resilient.

The tragedies of Cumbria and Boscastle have made me wonder whether people in those communities were aware that there were risks that could not be engineered away. If they were so aware, could they, with adequate notice and advice, have prepared themselves better to protect their existing properties?

All that is notwithstanding the observations that have been made about building new properties above flood-risk areas. I very much agree with the observations that many hon. Members have made already about planning and building in flood plain areas. We need to be much harder with ourselves and work to stop increasing flood risk.

My hon. Friend the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire made a very good point about our trip to Lyons. The city lies at the confluence of two of France's major rivers, and it is very interesting to see how the authorities there have integrated their flood defences both regionally and locally. They have built massive sustainable urban drainage schemes, and the integration of those SUDS with the protection of the built environment is very impressive. It provides some very important lessons for how we might do the same here.

However, when we look at how the Bill is drafted, there is a subtlety about clause 3 and the way that it integrates with clause 7. We as legislators must read the definition of "risk" with care, and I hope that the Committee that succeeds the one that I chair will examine carefully how all those tasked with developing the new strategies deal with that definition. We must make rigorously certain that "risk" incorporates all the things that have been mentioned in the debate so far, and that a response to those risk elements is part of the Environment Agency's strategy. If we do that then, with the right degree of scrutiny and pressure from parliamentarians, we can use the subtlety of the drafting to ensure that we can at least have the right shopping list, so to speak, of the things that must be responded to. Thereafter, we can examine critically way whether we have the resources and the wherewithal to deal with any problems that might arise.

One thing that worries me is whether we have, in sum total, the right degree of expertise, especially with regard to engineers skilled in the management of water. The Environment Agency has taken steps to address that issue, but it strikes me that those particular talents will be in very great demand, especially among the local authorities at county level that will be in charge of implementing some of these strategic matters.

Water does not recognise political boundaries. I hope the Committee will examine carefully whether, in developing strategies on political boundaries, we have the mechanisms for catchment areas to knit things together. One of the problems arising from the truncated Bill is that the flood risk management plans that are part of the EU floods directive implementation process are dealt with by statutory instrument outwith the scope of the Bill. I understand why, for legislative reasons, the Government are doing that, but the danger is that the legislation implementing the European directive remains outside the integrating function of the Bill. I seek reassurance from the Secretary of State in his winding-up speech that the gluing together of the parts will take place.

One of the things missing from the Bill is the requirement for the Environment Agency to prepare river maps showing who is responsible for what. That seems to me to be part of the requirements of the EU floods directive. We can immediately see the complexity and the problem of integrating all the parts so that the strategy developed by the Environment Agency will work in reality. I hope the Secretary of State will address the issue in his winding-up speech or when the Bill goes into Committee.

We have talked a great deal this evening about SUDS. Our Committee looked, for example, at highway drainage. When the 2007 events occurred, our highways became the drainage channels to rivers in such a way that the rivers could not accommodate the water running off so quickly. "Slow water" is a phrase that has been used in the debate this evening. Anything that slows things down is a good idea. The integration of sustainable urban drainage solutions for highways is jolly good but, as the Government said:

> "We recognise that there is currently no incentive for highway authorities to install sustainable drainage systems because the cost of highway drainage is met by water customers."

That is the kind of risk factor which, if it is teased out at the planning stage of the development of the risk strategy, we might be able to mitigate, but it requires a burden shift in terms of funding. We see the same questions recurring about resources and who has the money to deal with these complicated issues. In Committee some of the real-world challenges posed by flooding should be tested out.

In the Bill, the implications of climate change are a feature to be examined in the context of the development of the strategy. One of the things that increasingly worries me, and which the sad events in Cumbria underscore, is that a once in 1,000-years event can occur. I was asked about this in the context of our existing flood defence systems. In a city such as London, the highway drainage system is scoped to deal with a one in 30-year event. What would happen in London if a once in 1,000-years event occurred? We would have catastrophic flooding, but can we afford to scope up our drainage system by a factor of 30 to cope with that? The answer is probably no. That is why we must be honest when we look at what we can and cannot do, and prepare accordingly.

The Bill is silent on the critical infrastructure but—coming back to the question of risks and picking up the point made by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood)—that can be incorporated in the risks and therefore encompassed by the strategy of the Environment Agency. If the Bill deals with the risks of reservoirs, the question of the integrity of bridges needs to be re-examined.

Cumbria taught us a rude and painful lesson. Structures which we thought were impervious to the effects of flooding certainly were not. A new dimension of community disruption occurred which none of the previous flooding events in this country had illustrated. Although the Bill is silent on that, the powers and the responsibilities, particularly of county highway authorities, should be re-examined to make sure that there is a duty upon them to re-examine bridge structures regularly to determine whether they are capable of withstanding the type of event that occurred in Cumbria.

[Mr. Jack]

One of the aspects that we should reflect on, which emerged from the evidence that we received, is that in the areas that we represent, all of us have a much more articulate constituency of members of the public who are now infinitely better informed about every aspect of flooding. They know about water courses, they have local knowledge, and they are vociferous in arguing their corner. They are a very important part of the process that the Bill deals with. If we as politicians do not recognise the human dimension—the public dimension—all our discussions about flooding, water charging and so on will be the poorer. We must acknowledge the role of the informed member of the public and make certain that they are properly involved in the consultation processes for which the Bill provides as part of the strategy that the Environment Agency is to introduce.

I conclude by saying that I, too, am delighted that the Bill deals with the surface area water charging regime. However, I have one concern. The Bill rightly identifies one group of people who can benefit from positive discrimination. I support that, but on the issue of the affordability of water, individual citizens may look slightly jealously at that part of the Bill and say, "What about us?" In supporting the intent of the Bill, I hope that whoever forms the next Government will return to the question early in the next Parliament and complete the task that the Bill begins.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), I should give notice that after his speech, the limit will be reduced to 10 minutes in an effort to ensure that those who have been waiting will get a chance to contribute.

7.37 pm

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), the Chairman of the Select Committee. In view of your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall be relatively brief.

The Government have been criticised tonight, first for not acting quickly enough on the Pitt recommendations, and secondly for not having a broad enough Bill. I think the Government have brought forward a Bill that is well focused and important. Above all, it can be passed within the next 12 parliamentary weeks; it is important to do the business.

Those who have spoken about the Cave and Walker reports should reflect on the fact that affordability and competition are difficult issues. Those who have been involved with abstraction licences for many years, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), know how difficult they are and how difficult it is to get a response from the National Farmers Union allowing them to go forward.

Martin Horwood: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. Such issues would be difficult to tackle in total during the passage of the Bill, but would he not accept a simple amendment of Ofwat's remit to allow water companies to produce social tariffs to help some of our least well off constituents? That would be a simple measure which I am sure we could manage in the months ahead.

Paddy Tipping: That would not be a simple amendment, and social tariffs are not an easy issue. Those of us who will be involved in the Energy Bill know how difficult it is. Such issues will be dealt with not in Committee, but by secondary legislation. The EU flood regulation measure is before the House by way of a statutory instrument. It includes maps and assessments of flood risk, and it is disappointing that it looks as though the House will not have the opportunity to discuss those matters.

The essential point of today's debate has been about the 2007 floods. They focused our attention not on river flooding, which had been the discussion in the past, but on surface water flooding. Right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken have made it very clear that there are no easy solutions to the problem, but in the course of my work either in Nottinghamshire or on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee people have said to me, "Oh, it's simple: you just keep the drains clear." Given the volume of intense rain, however, drains will not be able to cope in the future. We are living in a different world and in a different environment, and that is why the points that the right hon. Member for Fylde made—about being clear with people, working with them and giving them an understanding of the risk—are so important.

It is also important to introduce a set of responsibilities, and the Bill defines them. I am a great supporter of the Environment Agency, and I believe that it has the flexibility not to act in a centralising way, because people in their areas know the problems. If they are allowed to work together, they can find the solutions, too, so the notion of lead authorities is important. In my local authority of Nottinghamshire, the county council, as the agency with responsibility for highways, will take the lead, and I know that it will work closely with the district councils. In some areas, local authorities are able to propose solutions, but it is important that they have the resources to do so. I am not as confident as some of my Front-Bench colleagues that the measures in the Bill—the savings that will be made from the adoption of private sewers—will be sufficient to enable local authorities to make major progress. Nor am I confident that local authorities have the skills, because many councils lost those skills at the time of water privatisation, so there is a big training responsibility that needs to be taken forward.

It is important also to mention the two types of bodies that have been an unsung presence in today's discussion. They are the regional flood and coastal committees and the internal drainage boards. The best internal drainage boards are really very good, but the pattern throughout the country is patchy. The strength of internal drainage boards, however, is that their members know the solutions, and if they are prepared to engage and work with other parties, they will make progress.

I am pleased that regional flood and coastal committees are going to continue. There had been some discussion about their future, but their levy power is important, because it provides the committee with a sum of money that belongs to itself, enabling the introduction of innovative solutions and steps that the Environment Agency would not be able to take. In the Trent valley in Nottinghamshire,

for example, funds from the regional levy have enabled the introduction of adaptation measures, which would never have been on the Environment Agency's list of priorities.

Another important issue, which has been characterised in today's debate, is the notion of working with the environment. We must continue to move away from the belief that concrete is the solution to everything. Farming practices can make a real difference, and we need to work in upland areas to ensure that peat bogs are not denuded but are the sponge—the moss—that soaks up water. The notion of working with the environment really is important.

However, it is also important that we recognise the power of the environment—the power of the sea. I was slightly concerned by the comments of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who seemed to imply that one could always protect the coast. That is quite manifestly wrong. The notion of managed retreat will have to be discussed openly and rationally with local people, who clearly have major concerns. It is no good saying to them that there will be environmental and conservation benefits from such an approach. There will be, but we will have to talk to people very openly about the cost and the fact that things are going to change. It is no good promising that all farmland can be protected. It helps nobody at all, and if that is the Opposition's policy they need to reflect on it.

I have long been an advocate of sustainable urban drainage systems. They can make a big impression on and difference to the landscape, but we need to remember that SUDS are very different: there are high-technology solutions and softer, grassland solutions. We need to be aware of the connection between SUDS and the existing drainage system, too. There is not an either/or choice, because the two interrelate. We must have further discussions with people such as the Home Builders Federation about that relationship, and we need to be absolutely clear that SUDS will continue to cost money in the future. We need to make it clear also that local authorities should be responsible for SUDS, because they have the planning powers and they are good at looking after recreational areas and open spaces. None the less, there is an argument for involving water companies, but they are conspicuously absent from that aspect of the Bill.

I promised to keep my remarks brief, but I shall say a few words about sewers, which have not been discussed today. Clause 41 makes it clear that new developments will have to involve the adoption and maintenance of sewers of a sufficient standard. Members with a long memory of the issue will remember that we had a voluntary arrangement, but that simply has not worked, so the statutory powers in the Bill are quite important. We must ensure that there are no problems in the future, and the clause includes a new code of practice, but it needs to be discussed with others. It is not an easy issue; it is a technological issue. There is a view among builders and developers that it has not been sufficiently discussed, and, as we are talking about introducing the measure next year, in 2010, such discussions need to take place.

My final point is about the adoption of private sewers, an issue that is conspicuously absent from the Bill. I have been campaigning for almost 20 years for the adoption of private sewers.

Mr. Drew: We know!

Paddy Tipping: My hon. Friend has heard it all before.

I do not want rhetoric; I want reality. I want action on the issue, and the Secretary of State promised action. We need it, because all over the country, including in my constituency in Nottinghamshire, householders are affected by private sewers. When their houses and gardens are flooded by foul sewers, it is a dreadful experience.

We need to ensure that those sewers are adopted. The Secretary of State says that he will do so, and he will, but he needs to get on with it. We were promised not only a consultation on private sewers, but their adoption by 2011. However, I say to my right hon. Friend, at whom I am pointing to reinforce my statement, that that consultation has yet to appear, and we were promised its appearance by Christmas. I want private sewers to be adopted by 2011, but unless the Secretary of State and his officials put their foot down, that deadline will retreat into the distance.

This debate might be my final chance to discuss environmental issues in the House, as it might be for the right hon. Member for Fylde. I have campaigned for more than 20 years to have private sewers adopted, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe has helped me. I therefore say to the Secretary of State: make my day, make the promise, publish the consultation tomorrow and ensure that private sewers are adopted by 2011.

7.49 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping).

I should like to start by thanking the Secretary of State—I suppose belatedly, although I am sure that I said the same thing at the time—for all the help he gave to and interest he took in Tewkesbury at the time of the floods. He was extremely helpful. He readily came over to visit and was always available on the phone. That help was much appreciated by my constituents, and again I thank him for it.

I am not taking it personally that I am the first speaker on the Conservative Benches to have his time curtailed; I think that it is probably because I spoke in the Queen's Speech debate on this issue. However, I make no apology for returning to it today because it is so very important.

I want to run through a few aspects that are lacking from the Bill or that I would like strengthened. Of course, as has been said from the Front Bench, Conservative Members support the Bill. We welcome its early introduction after the Queen's Speech in the hope that we can get it through before Parliament is dissolved for a general election. However, if we are to take advantage of its introduction, there are changes that should be made; I am sure that those decisions will be made in Committee.

We have heard a little about house building. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who said that we should not build houses in the wrong places. He also mentioned the way in which houses are built. The famous and iconic picture of Tewkesbury abbey surrounded by water was seen everywhere; people remember it in countries that I have been to all over the world. It is important to point out

[Mr. Laurence Robertson]

that although the abbey was surrounded by water, it did not flood. The Normans started to build the abbey at the end of the 11th century. People knew where to build and how to build in those days; it seems that we have forgotten about those skills. We must try to build houses that are not only flood resistant but do not displace water and cause problems for other houses. I am not sure whether it is entirely possible to do that, although I know that new drainage systems are being discussed; sumps have been mentioned tonight. We must also start to build houses to take account of the power that they will require in the light of climate change. I know that that is a different subject, but we have talked a lot about it, so it is relevant.

Above all, we have to ask ourselves why my Tewkesbury constituency suffered so badly. The regional spatial strategy proposes to build 14,500 extra houses in what is clearly a flood risk area. Those figures are based on what the south-west regional assembly is suggesting and on the Government's projection that we need 3 million more houses by 2026, but there is no scientific basis for making those estimates. When this Government came to power, they said, correctly, that they were going to end the "predict and provide" approach to housing, but they have not only reinforced that approach but regionalised it, thereby taking the decisions away from local people. That is much to be regretted. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood), who kindly mentioned several places in my constituency, including Warden Hill, Leckhampton and Wheatpieces, was absolutely right to suggest that those new build figures should be revisited. I believe that they should be scrapped and we should think again about where we are going to build houses. In that respect, I am not satisfied with the Bill because I do not think it will stop the building of houses on flood risk areas.

Another important issue became evident during the fight to save the area—I do not think that it is too dramatic to describe it as such given that some people lost up to three weeks' water supply, we almost lost the county's entire electricity supply and, tragically, we lost three lives. It became obvious to me that it was extremely difficult to pinpoint which organisation was responsible for maintaining a waterway or water feature, whether it be a culvert, a stream, a brook, or whatever we want to call it. As a result, there was a delay in clearing or repairing that waterway, which created great difficulty. One of the reasons why people did not want to accept responsibility for a given waterway was that they would then have the responsibility for fixing it, which costs money. I am glad that several hon. Members have made that point. When we set out to give responsibility to different organisations, as we should, we must ensure that we identify who is responsible for which waterway and that they are sufficiently funded to carry out the work that we require them to do. I am not sure that the Bill goes far enough to satisfy me in that respect.

As has been noted, it is not enough to act only in emergencies. Welcome as that aid is at the time, it is too late by then. We need to ensure that all the waterways are maintained throughout the year. As I said in the Queen's Speech debate, if we drive cars, we should, if we are sensible, have them serviced regularly and not let them break down before we do anything with them. It is the same with waterways: we must ensure that they are cleared and maintained. We must also ensure—this was not happening before the flooding—that riparian owners of certain waterways carry out their maintenance. As far as I can see, local authorities have not been doing that.

As I said, we lost the water supply and almost lost the electricity supply; some people lost electricity for a while. We need to provide alternative sources of utilities. People in my constituency and, I am sure, in other constituencies, had an extremely difficult time in going without water for so long. The heroic efforts of the armed forces, the emergency services and ordinary volunteers, including children, to get water supplies to houses warmed the heart; nevertheless, we do not want to have to go through that again. I hope that alternative supplies of water and electricity can be set up; at least, we should ensure that places such as Mythe waterworks and Walham electricity substation are properly protected.

There are many other issues that I could raise, but alas I am running out of time and cannot do so in any great detail. On insurance, of course, as I said in an earlier intervention, we must appreciate that insurance companies are businesses that must make profits; we require them to exist, so they have to be financially solvent. However, in some cases they have been unduly harsh on many of their customers by increasing excesses to as much as £10,000 or £15,000—even £20,000 in a case that I have heard of—at the same time as increasing premiums. If somebody has an excess of £10,000 or £15,000 for water damage, they are effectively not insured against that, so why do they have to pay an increased premium? That is most unfair. Although it is welcome that flood defences are undertaken in so many places—several schemes have been completed in my own area—that can sometimes make things worse as regards getting insurance. One or two companies may say, "Oh, that is a flood risk area. Those people are in danger—we won't insure them or we're going to put the excesses up." That is very unfair. I know that the Government have expressed concern about that practice, and I hope that they will carry on talking to insurance companies about it.

7.59 pm

Mr. Ian McCartney (Makerfield) (Lab): I first put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his Department for working closely with me over the past few years on flood solutions in my constituency. Like many MPs who represent former mining communities, since the closure of our collieries and the underground watercourse base, I have seen increased flooding in small mining communities year in, year out. By 2002, that culminated in flooding in my constituency not once every 70 years but once, twice or three times a year, affecting the same communities, families and small businesses. Some 90 per cent. of small businesses affected by sewer water flooding never reopen their doors, and they are totally lost to the family and the community. Increasingly, communities had come to feel besieged by their inability to get investment projects that could provide solutions to the problems that they faced. They consequently found it increasingly difficult to get support for the insurance and reinsurance of their properties.

In 2004, the situation got to a point at which a radical solution had to be found. United Utilities, the local council and the Environment Agency, with the support of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs, came up with a co-ordinated plan to reorganise and re-engineer the way they worked—the establishment of a local community flood forum, elected by and on behalf of the community and funded and resourced by United Utilities. That body was important in developing an investment plan to deal with all the flooding problems. Investment needs were identified for engineering solutions or, where those were not possible, for mitigation solutions. The forum engaged with and involved the community at every stage.

This year we have not had a major flood in the community, because of the multi-million pound investment that has taken place with the engagement and involvement of the community, United Utilities, the local authority and the Environment Agency. Next February the next phase will take place, following further consultation with the community flood forum. There will be a further range of investments to improve even further the potential of engineering and mitigation solutions in communities where flooding is likely in the next few years. That next phase is preventive.

All that was achieved with the help of my right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley). When he was a Minister, he and I persuaded Ofwat in 2005 to change its arrangements and take sewer water flooding in communities more seriously. Frankly, however, Ofwat has not had its eye on the ball in the past decade. On every occasion, it has underestimated the number of houses that can be affected by surface and sewer water flooding. It has not taken seriously enough the capacity of the insurance industry to turn a blind eye to the continuing problem on many occasions.

The Bill is important in ensuring that we implement much of Sir Michael Pitt's inquiry. I gave him written and verbal evidence about the experiences of our community in Wigan. In 2005, as a Minister, I wrote a report on how we should better co-ordinate investment in Carlisle following the flooding, to ensure that there was a structure to deal with flooding from the River Eden and to bring together all the investment strategies of Cumbria county council, the city of Carlisle, the regional development agency and the Government. That all needed to be put together in a co-ordinated way, with the involvement of the community and under the leadership of the city council, not only so that there were preventive measures for the future but so that from the carnage that took place in Carlisle in January 2005, there would come restructuring, reinvestment and reinvigoration in the city.

It is important that the lessons are learned from all such events, including those in 2007 and this year. The Bill must ensure that each and every community has the ability to ensure that it has all the agencies working together effectively. We must consider the potential of using the model of community engagement and involvement that we have created in Wigan, and seeing whether it can be effectively replicated in other areas to ensure that communities have ownership and control in all circumstances. They must have a way of engaging with the utilities, local authorities and the Environment Agency to handle these matters.

There is much to be said, and I reserve the right to return to many points on Report, but I know that other colleagues wish to contribute, so I shall finish with insurance. I know that the Government came to an agreement with the Association of British Insurers on a code of practice and all that goes with it. Welcome though that is, I have constituents who are still being refused access to insurance products. We still do not have a system of shared risk in place in Britain. There is shared capital risk, for instance through my constituents supporting people in Carlisle and Cumbria, and quite rightly so, but there is no shared insurance risk. The greater the risk of properties flooding, the more individuals and communities are left bereft of proper coverage.

In 1982, as a young local councillor, I helped persuade my council and the insurance industry to introduce a tenants and leaseholders insurance scheme. It was the first in the country, and now hundreds of schemes on that model are operating effectively and providing insurance cover for every tenant who wants it, paid through their rent in an affordable and accessible way. As the years go by, we have to find a way of having an affordable and accessible insurance system paid through people's water rates, so that we can share the risk. The ability to pay must be paramount, and people must have insurance cover in all circumstances so that we share the risk and the cost of investment. Unless we have such a system in place, hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens will be unable to be insured in the decades to come, through no fault of their own. We need such a radical solution.

I have made a written submission about that scheme to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Wansdyke (Dan Norris), and his officials are coming to my constituency soon to meet tenants and the local authority to discuss how it operates. If we can operate it effectively now for housing insurance costs, without undermining the marketplace, why can we not do it in relation to the flooding problem? What problem do ABI members have with doing that now? The problem will not go away, and it will be exacerbated in the years to come.

Everybody should have the right to affordable and accessible insurance, and the risk should be shared. If the Bill cannot ensure that, we should be looking to find other means of ensuring that it happens. Without it, the cost to the public Exchequer of uninsured properties and families will be not millions but billions in the years to come. We need to sit down with the insurance industry, be tougher and come up with a workable set of proposals. Although Sir Michael Pitt decided in the end against the introduction of such a scheme, the evidence is there in his report that it can and will work. We must ensure that we introduce it. If my hon. Friend cannot give us a decision about it this evening, I hope that we can return to the matter at some stage during the Bill's passage and put pressure on the ABI. What has happened so far is welcome, but it is not radical enough and does not go far enough. It will no go far enough until every community has affordable, accessible insurance so that if it is flooded, the consequence is not a total loss of business or family income and a disaster that takes years and years to recover from.

8.8 pm

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Bill will be very helpful if the Government listen to the comments and thoughts in hon. Members' contributions and take them forward for further consideration in Committee.

[Mrs. Maria Miller]

I wish to focus my comments on flood risk and water management in the planning process. It is absolutely right that they have a prominent place in it, and the Bill gives us the opportunity to develop it further. Many of our constituents assume that the availability of water and the ability to dispose of waste water are part of the process, and that the importance of not building on flood plains is integral to the process when it is decided to build new houses or commercial developments. It is right that the Bill looks at how we can put the emphasis on the prevention rather than the cure for such problems, although that does not take away from the comments that have been made tonight on the losses suffered by families and communities who have experienced the dreadful nature of flooding, particularly in recent months.

The Bill provides an opportunity to make water and flood management integral to the planning process. Clause 9 provides the opportunity for lead local authorities in England to develop, maintain and monitor a strategy for local flood risk management in their areas, which includes

"surface runoff...groundwater, and...ordinary water courses"

and to put in place an assessment of local flood risk management—clause 10 does the same for Wales. However, a number of questions have been asked about that enhanced role for local authorities, particularly on the apparent rigidity within the Bill concerning the boundary areas within which local authorities can operate their new ability to look at water and flood risk management. Additionally, the Select Committee said that the way in which the Bill was currently drafted potentially precluded a more pragmatic, cross-boundary approach to planning when it comes to water and flood issues.

In my own constituency in north Hampshire, infrastructure management is not bound by borough or district boundaries or hemmed in by county boundaries. We regularly look at how we can plan our infrastructure management across not only one county boundary but two. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), the Chairman of the Committee, said in his contribution today, water knows not political boundaries. Will the Minister say how we can ensure that the important provision in the Bill to help local authorities to have a more active role is not curtailed or hemmed in? There is probably a need to think further about how the Bill can be more flexible to reflect existing local operations.

The importance of local knowledge is another matter that hon. Members have spoken about in the debate. The encouragement of borough and county councils to be involved in flood risk planning will give councillors and their local residents the ability to ensure that proposed plans include local knowledge, including a community's experience of floods over many generations.

Does the Minister feel that, within the devolution of responsibility for flood and water management to local level—borough or county—there is a lack of read-across between the Bill and the policies of some of his colleagues in other Departments? I am thinking particularly of his colleagues who set house building targets in the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is good that the Bill devolves the management of such important issues to a very local level, yet house building, which is one of the things that flooding most impacts, is still primarily dictated by his right hon. and hon. Friends in Whitehall—I am talking about decisions on the number of houses that are going to be built and where they will be built. I have experience of that in my constituency.

Obviously, if house building is dictated centrally, it is difficult for local authorities to avoid building on greenfield sites, which results in the flooding problems that other hon. Members have talked about. Indeed, building on flood zones is very much against the will and wishes of local councillors and local residents, including in the east of Basingstoke in my constituency. There is also very little that local authorities can do about building on brownfield sites, which can be the cause of so many problems, including surface water run-off. Those problems read across to other areas of Government policy, and they need some firm consideration before the Bill passes through the House.

As the Secretary of State said, the Bill has to be in a slimmed-down form so that it can progress speedily, but we should not let it be a missed opportunity on insurance—other right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned that. There needs to be a better alignment between insurance companies' perception of flood risk and the actual flood risk. Perhaps the experience of my constituents living near Petty's brook in Chineham, a ward in my constituency, is not atypical—other hon. Members will have had the same problem. Insurance companies perceive that there is a greatly enhanced risk of flooding, even though people in that area have had quite rigorous reassurance from local authorities and the Environment Agency. Will the Minister consider whether local authorities could have a role in monitoring that and in pressing insurance companies to ensure that they are correctly assessing risks and not inflating them in a way that is not in the best interests of our constituents?

Clause 27 deals with the incredibly important issue of sustainable development. The Government could provide some important clarity on this matter. The clause requires lead local authorities to take account of the natural environment when ensuring that development is sustainable. There is an opportunity in the clause for the Minister to issue guidance on how local authorities might interpret that and clarify what they mean. Some clarity could be found in the consultation, which mentions the opportunity better to link planning and water quality management under the water framework directive. There is an opportunity for a more integrated approach to water management, which the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) touched on. We cannot think about one aspect of water without thinking about the others—we cannot look at supply without looking at disposal—yet the Bill does not explicitly deal with that. I am sure that the guidance provides an opportunity to do so.

The reason why the Bill is particularly important in my constituency is that we have just undertaken a water cycle report at the request of the south-east regional authority. The level of house building in my constituency was called into question because of the inability of the River Lodden to deal with the considerable levels of pollution within it. Unfortunately, the report shows us that the level of house building will do nothing to reduce pollution in the river. Such things need to be taken into consideration far more in future house building targets. The Bill gives an opportunity to make it clear that local authorities have an obligation in their new role as managers of implementation. That would add to the impact of the Bill in our communities.

I should have liked to comment on a great many other measures in the Bill, not least the privatisation of sewers and the implications of that for local authorities, which is important, and the aspects that relate to local community organisations, but I shall draw my comments to a close there.

8.18 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I wish to return to the statutory duty for flood rescue, which I raised when I intervened on the Secretary of State. I apologise if he addressed it—I was hanging on his every eloquent word, but I may have nodded off or been distracted.

It is important when we frame legislation such as this Bill that we take into account the views of those who will be at the front line of implementing it. I am one of the founding members of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. I have therefore tried to consult the FBU on its concerns about the legislation. It is important to take on board its views following the 2007 floods. The FBU met those of its members who had been on the front line dealing with the floods and undertook a detailed consultation on their experiences on the ground. The report that the FBU published as a result said:

"The health, safety and welfare of fire crews were put at risk during the floods through insufficient planning, equipment and training. Firefighters should not have had to wade through contaminated water wearing unsuitable protective equipment and exposing themselves to health hazards."

Another aspect that came up in the discussions with fire crews was confirmation that they

"have not been trained consistently to the standards necessary to deal with the range of water-related incidents they have to tackle."

After the consultation the FBU undertook with its members on the 2007 floods, it concluded that the Government should introduce a statutory duty on fire and rescue authorities to respond to significant water-related events such as flooding, and make the necessary resources available to meet these obligations. That was confirmed by the Pitt review which made the recommendation that I quoted earlier—that there should be a statutory duty placed on fire and rescue authorities for flood rescue in particular. Pitt went on to reject non-statutory alternatives. It said:

"The Review strongly believes that a statutory duty is the best means to achieve these outcomes."

It said that other non-statutory, voluntary approaches

"do not provide the certainty the public expect and the Review believes is needed."

Interestingly enough, the Government seemed to concur with those views, and have done so for some time. In the regulatory impact assessment in 2007, the Government backed a statutory duty. The RIA stated that

"relying on FRAs' discretionary powers, even where they receive central funding, means that they could still decline to use the specialist resources to aid other authorities"—

in major incidents—

"or in future decide to stop maintaining the capabilities provided by Government."

So the Government were concerned at that time that without a statutory duty they could not rely on the fire and rescue authorities to respond effectively or to maintain the capability of that response. The RIA also said that

"authorities have an incentive due to immediate local pressures to make provision for likely local needs, rather than ensuring that collectively there is provision for very unlikely large-scale incidents. This could, over time, reduce national resilience to such disruptive incidents".

Many, particularly in the FBU, would concur with the Government's view at the time, especially in a financial climate of budgetary pressures on fire and rescue authorities to focus on local needs rather than the strategic investment needed to confront major incidents.

It is also interesting that in 2007 the Secretary of State proposed a statutory duty for flooding as a core duty in section 9 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, but it was not eventually included in the order when it was published in March. The response of the Secretary of State today suggested that the Government have failed to include it in this Bill for three reasons. First, there are existing powers on which the Government can rely to place a duty on fire and rescue authorities. There is a slight difference between awarding a power and placing a duty on an authority, but from the point of view of the practitioners—the front-line workers and fire fighters who were called out time and again in 2007 and again this year—the existing powers are not satisfactory and do not place an adequate duty on fire and rescue authorities. As a result, they worry that once attention is turned away from the issue of flooding, local pressures will prevent the long-term consistent investment required by fire and rescue authorities.

Mr. McCartney: Allied to that is a secondary issue, which affects both the FBU and such fire and rescue authorities as Greater Manchester that are ringed by reservoirs, and that is the lack of transparency and engagement with them over reservoir safety regimes. They are not sure that this Bill will make them technical partners in ensuring reservoir safety, instead of some sort of grace and favour arrangement.

John McDonnell: That is another argument for statutory clarity, with statutory duties placed on authorities on flood rescue in particular, but in other areas as well, so that we know who has responsibility for what and who has the duty to provide. Budgetary pressures at a local level, especially in this financial climate, will be critical. We have had talk of the Thames barrier and the GLC's role in completing it. I was the chair of finance and deputy leader on the GLC when that happened. It was a cross-party project, but we had to beg the Government for funding consistently. In a different financial climate, it would have been difficult to achieve a consistency of investment that would have enabled us to complete that project. Eighteen months after the completion of the Thames barrier, Mrs. Thatcher abolished the GLC, but that is another story.

The second argument against the inclusion of a statutory duty was that Sir Ken Knight, the national adviser on such issues, was not convinced of the need for it. Much as I respect Sir Ken Knight, I do not confer on him papal powers of infallibility. Many other experts on fire and rescue authorities do support a statutory duty, especially those who experienced flooding in 2007 and 2009.

The final argument was that at least the legislation will introduce national standards that will be monitored by the Government. I welcome that. In fact, since 2003, the FBU has discussed with the Government their concerns about the retreat of fire and rescue services from national standards. So this is a welcome approach,

[John McDonnell]

but the national standards in the Bill will be best monitored if there is a duty on the fire and rescue authority with regard to flood rescue. In that way, everyone would be clear about the role that they have to play and the nature of the required investment to ensure that the authorities fulfilled their duties.

I urge the Government to reflect on the views put forward by the FBU and I would welcome further ministerial meetings with the FBU parliamentary group during the passage of the Bill to discuss potential amendments on Report to introduce the Pitt recommendation of a statutory duty for flood rescue to be placed on fire and rescue authorities.

8.27 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I come from, and represent, a very wet place. Flooding is something that we in the levels of Somerset have to deal with regularly, and certainly on an annual basis. Indeed, many of the village names in the area—Isle Abbots, Isle Brewers and Muchelney, which means "big island"—reflect the history of the place and the fact that those were island communities surrounded by wetland. We know what flooding is about. I am increasingly worried about the fact that these once-in-25-years, once-in-50-years and once-in-100-years events are now happening regularly. That leads me to suppose that the assessments based on historical data need to be revisited.

I welcome the Bill not least because, as the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said, the definition of flood risk—and therefore that which informs strategy—will, I hope, allow us to provide a comprehensive response to flooding difficulties. I suggest that those difficulties fall into three principal areas—prevention, mitigation and resilience, and response—and I want to deal rapidly with all three.

Many people will consider prevention to be a matter of flood defences, which can go so far but are not the answer to all our flooding problems, whether in terms of engineering or costs. They might play a part in the response in some areas, but we cannot approach the problem simply by building higher and higher walls and bigger and bigger flood defences.

The maintenance of ditches—or rhynes, as we call them in Somerset—to allow surface water to flow away and to increase the capacity of watercourses is also important, but again those who consider the maintenance of waterways and drainage to be the answer are deluding themselves. The requirement goes far beyond the capacity even if the maintenance is perfect, which it certainly is not. I have my criticisms of highways authorities not paying attention to, for instance, road drains and the effect of constant surface dressing, which often reduces ditch and drainage system capacity, but nevertheless I think we need to look at the matter anew.

We certainly need to consider the control of flow. We desperately need the co-ordination of agencies such as the Environment Agency and local authorities, but we also need to incorporate the highways authorities, developers and the Highways Agency, which is responsible for major trunk roads, such as the A303, which is a major flood concern in my constituency. In some places, its construction allows too much water to pass underneath, and in other cases, it holds it up and produces some of the problems, as was the case in the villages around Wincanton and Anchor Hill at Holton.

Bridges have the same capacity issues, and we have talked already about the vulnerability of bridges. That should not come as a surprise. I remember that, when I was a lad, the bridge at Pensford, which is probably in the Minister's constituency, was washed away. It was a major issue at the time. Bridges are a vulnerability; but often they are pinch-points for water too, because the arches under them do not provide sufficient capacity. We need therefore to look at the management of water flow and bridge capacity. I would also like a much greater emphasis placed on the whole river catchment area approach, which we started experimenting with on the River Parret, in Somerset, way back in the early 1990s when I was a county councillor. That is the only way of managing water flow effectively through a whole river catchment area.

Planning in connection with mitigation and resilience has been mentioned already. I made the point that we do not plan properly, but I was not just talking about building houses in the wrong places. We have a wonderful supermarket on the flood plain in Frome that was put there by a Government inspector against the advice of local people and authorities. It has impervious surfaces, of course, and a flood alleviation scheme attached to it. We hope that it will be successful, but nevertheless it is a risk.

I simply do not understand, however, why we do not build houses more resilient to flooding. It does not take a genius to realise that if the garage or wet rooms, such as the utility room or kitchen, are put downstairs and rooms that might be damaged by water are put upstairs, the house will be more resilient to flooding. Foundations, too could be lifted by just 2 or 3 feet. I know of a house in Queen Camel that is subjected to regular flooding, but which does not flood, despite the fact that the neighbouring houses do, because its foundations are 3 feet higher than those of the surrounding houses. It is a very simple recipe.

We need to consider community defences more and to encourage communities to take their own action where they can. The community of Stoney Stratton, in my constituency, knows what the problem is, where the water flow is and how to deal with it; what it does not have is the advice to help it to do it and the necessary resources which, as a community, it is prepared to provide via the parish council. I hope that we can encourage more local activity of that kind to provide that resilience.

We also need much more local and voluntary effort, which will require advice and co-ordination. There are some wonderful initiatives in my constituency—for instance, in West Camel, which is regularly flooded, but where people are now fitting water gates at the doors of their properties. They are fitting pumps that are responsive to flooding and provide that initial help at the point at which goods are salvageable. They are also using waterproof paint for surfaces up to the flood level in houses. That is the sort of initiative that ought to be taken in flood-vulnerable areas. There is good practice out there and good advice at the household and community levels. When people take such measures, that ought to be reflected in the insurance premium, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) said.

I want to deal now with the response. The emergency services must have the training to enable them to cope as best they can. We should remember that in rural areas it is often retained fire officers we are expecting to do such work. Warnings are important. More localised forecasting would be extremely helpful, as would having audible warning systems, not just the phone line, which has been successful and which I welcome. For a flood event in the middle of the night, it would be great if people knew that there would be a siren or even that a police car or a fire engine driving through the village with its siren going meant that they had to be on the alert for difficulties. Local readiness, encouraging volunteering, identifying vulnerable people in a parish council area and developing cascade systems are also important, as is developing community resources, even if that just means having a single dinghy available, so that people know where it is, who has to be collected and what the response has to be. Those are all things that need to be encouraged in the strategies.

Lastly, I want to deal with those resources that one might term community resources, including local authority buildings such as schools. I have already mentioned the Countess Gytha school in Queen Camel, which has repeatedly flooded and which I visited again yesterday morning. We need to have a new school. The school must be re-sited. We have the site; what we do not have in the local authority is the cash to make that happen. If we are taking flooding seriously, local authorities must have the resources to take sensible actions and find better sites for key buildings such as schools, hospitals and elderly people's homes, rather than simply continually decanting children out and refurbishing buildings.

However, that needs co-ordination between the Secretary of State's Department and other Departments, so that those resources are made available. I will be seeking a meeting with the Minister for Schools and Learners in the near future about that school, but I wish I knew that I had the support of DEFRA in saying that this issue—ensuring that community facilities that are regularly at risk of flooding will be supported by the Government's funding mechanisms to be moved to more appropriate places—is an urgent matter.

The Bill is a start in the right direction. I can see it has enormous potential in developing the strategies, but there is a huge array of issues that it needs to encompass if it is to do so successfully.

8.38 pm

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): Before I begin, let me thank the Secretary of State for all the work that he has done in Cumbria over recent weeks. It really has been appreciated. We welcome the solidarity that he has shown, the efforts that he has undertaken on our behalf and the decisive action that he has demonstrated from day one. It is absolutely right to bring the Bill forward now. It could not have waited any longer, and in that regard its length is self-explanatory.

May I also associate myself with many of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell)? Anecdotally at least, the experience of the Fire Brigades Union in Cumbria right now certainly echoes the comments that he made about fire and rescue efforts in previous disasters.

As a west Cumbrian Member of Parliament, I cannot say for certain that any Bill or Act could have prevented the recent flooding in west Cumbria. It is almost impossible for any Act of Parliament to cater for a one-in-1,000-year event. Let us bear in mind that Parliament is not yet 1,000-years-old. However, living in and among the areas affected by the floods, I would say that my guess from the ground is that the Bill could have helped.

We are all settled, I hope, on the principles of the Stern report. It will take hundreds of millions of pounds to put right the damage in west Cumbria. However, the cost of the cure, not to mention the economic consequences of the flood damage and the effect upon people's lives and communities, will surely dwarf the cost of prevention.

In the four and a half years that I have been in this place, I have routinely worked alongside communities in my constituency that have suffered from flooding. If the Bill had been enacted sooner, it would certainly have made a huge difference to those more ordinary events in places such as Parton, Beckermet, Braystones, Egremont, Holmrook, Cleator or Keswick. The organisational and accountability changes envisaged in the Bill would have made a difference—in some circumstances, a life-changing difference—to the lives of the people in those communities. As I have said recently in this House, I have seen the effects of flooding on those communities for myself.

As the people of Parton taught me four years ago, it takes only a little water to cause a flood and so make a huge impact upon the life of a family. A foot of water can ruin a home, and everything in it. Floods take away so much that can never be replaced. This issue is one of the most difficult to face us as a nation. Flooding is likely to happen more, not less, and we need to be able to meet the challenges that it poses in practical and policy terms. Improvements to the present system can be effected through legislation, but, inescapably, increased public spending on flood defences and water management will have to be at the heart of our effort. This might not be a universally popular clarion call right now—although it is in some quarters, at least—but it is a fact that must be faced up to.

I hope to be able to serve on the Bill Committee that will scrutinise this legislation following today's Second Reading. In the hope of being able to serve on that Committee, I will be asking as many flood action groups as possible in the affected areas to help me to undertake some pre-Committee scrutiny of the Bill, with a view to making their detailed views known. One of the strengths of the Bill is that it places valuable information germane to flooding and coastal erosion in the public domain, thereby massively increasing accountability and, therefore, action. The bitter experience of many of my constituents is that there is all too often no accountability with regard to flooding issues. There is consequently no ownership, no action and no improvement. I cannot stress strongly enough the anger and disenchantment that this causes.

In one local village, which can act as a microcosm for the many communities—particularly semi-rural coastal communities—facing flooding throughout Cumbria and the rest of the country, there are long-standing flooding problems caused by a variety of factors. The first is geography. The village in question is by the sea at the bottom of a large steep hill in the western Lake district, and the hill contains natural watercourses, streams and culverts. The second is infrastructure. The village is a

[Mr. Jamie Reed]

little over a mile from a water treatment plant which discharges into the sea. In addition, it is an historic mining village surrounded by deep mineworkings. It also contains some railway bridges.

The third factor is development. Fine period Georgian housing sits alongside traditional terraced housing and some modern housing. Sometimes, the enforcement of planning decisions is incredibly difficult due to the problems in determining the ownership of land, culverts, drains and waterways, and there is a profound lack of accountability. The village is served by three tiers of local government, which presents its own unique difficulties. Furthermore, rainfall is increasing and the sea levels are rising.

That village could be one of many throughout Cumbria, the north or Scotland, but its problems are there now and they are very real. As the county that contains the Lake district, and is next to the Irish sea, Cumbria requires unique help. I was speaking to one of the village residents on Friday night, and she told me that she and her husband take it in turns to keep watch whenever it rains through the night, such is their fear of flooding.

I remind all hon. Members that flooding is not uncommon in this country, and that we are living in the world's fourth largest economy at the start of the 21st century. Speed is of the essence. Those people are incensed by the lack of accountability, but they are not beaten by it. The village now has its own flood defence plan. If necessary, they will alert each other at 3, 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, and strategically place their sandbags, create their own waterways and fit their own flood defences to protect their property and their village. It is a remarkable village, with great people, and I commend their civic-mindedness, which is genuinely inspirational. But I want the Bill to change their lives quickly and for the better. Can the Secretary of State assure me that this will be the case?

As I mentioned, that community is a microcosm of the whole of Cumbria. We in the west of the county live by the sea and are surrounded by the fells. My constituency is home to England's deepest lake and tallest mountain. I would also suggest that it is the most beautiful in the country, and I urge hon. Members to visit it. But in a county such as ours—with a population of fewer than 500,000—how can local authority revenues ever support the infrastructure developments and improvements that need to be made? Even if set at punitive levels, the tax take would never be sufficient to undertake the necessary works. It is therefore clear that, in areas such as Cumbria, organisations such as Cumbria county council and Copeland borough council need to be the recipients of dedicated additional public money, over and above what we can raise ourselves, particularly if they are designated as a lead local flood authority, as envisaged in the Bill. Can the Secretary of State provide some indication of the Government's thinking on that?

On the subject of accountability, many people, myself included, are inclined to believe that the flooding problems we face, which are compounded by environmental change and increasing rainfall, have been exacerbated since the privatisation of the water boards in this country. I make no ideological point at all, as there are benefits to both private and public ownership models and each one works to different ends in different ways. However, since privatisation, our water drainage and management networks appear to have sharply deteriorated. Do we know what the situation is? Is there any benchmark against which to measure this? Can the Secretary of State tell us in the House today, or in Committee or on Third Reading precisely what the situation is?

It may well be that significant revenue could be raised here to help with this problem. If—and it is a big if—there has been a proven and demonstrable decline in the network since privatisation, a windfall tax, ring-fenced for flood prevention measures, may well be called for. Will the Secretary of State explain precisely and in more detail what this Bill will mean for water companies in the country?

As I went around the flooded areas in the wake of the recent floods in west Cumbria, there was real concern about the role of water companies, their infrastructure investments and the nature of their accountability. I hope that we can hear some answers from the Secretary of State, so that my constituents and I will know whether it is right to push for fundamental change with regard to the responsibilities of water companies. In the same way, will the Government give further detail not simply on the Bill's ability to legislate to improve our ability to cope with the risk of flooding, but also on the heightened risks of other dangers caused by flooding?

I shall now bring my remarks to a close because other Members want to speak. In short, prevention is better than cure, and we need to act exceptionally quickly.

3.46 pm

Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed), who is absolutely right to highlight the importance of accountability, the dislocation that exists between accountability and responsibility, and the frustration that many people feel that there are insufficient structures that cover those particular issues. I contribute tonight because my constituency lies entirely on a flood plain, the vast majority of which is below sea level. Most of it has been reclaimed from the sea over the years, primarily by the Dutch, but it began as long ago as Roman times.

I think the Government were absolutely correct to respond to the 2007 floods, to instigate the Pitt report and initially to accept all its findings, but I am sure that the Government would accept that the Bill is not as comprehensive as was originally envisaged. Whoever form the next Government after the next general election—I obviously hope that it will be the Conservatives—will have to return to this issue to develop and build on some of the themes missing from the Bill.

Maps were provided by the Environment Agency to all Members of Parliament. Mine shows that if the flood defences failed, my whole constituency would be under water as a result of the combination of failing coastal flood defences and those dealing with precipitation and fluvial flooding. There have been problems in east Lincolnshire, most notably back in 1953, when significant floods along the whole of the eastern English coast took place. Homes and businesses were destroyed, people lost their lives and significant tracts of agricultural land were salinated.

The fact that there has not been a serious flood in Lincolnshire since 1953 is, I think, a reflection of the investment that has gone into coastal defences and the excellent workings of the internal drainage boards in the county. Clearly, with climate change, the risk of flooding will be exacerbated, so we need to ensure that we are ready for any particular climate change that may impact not just in Lincolnshire but elsewhere in the country.

It is important to give the House a feel for the scale of the drainage schemes in Lincolnshire. There are 11 internal drainage boards, which manage water levels over 1.3 million square miles, and 171 operating pumping stations, maintaining 3,450 miles of managed drainage channels protecting more than 500,000 properties. Although I do not criticise hon. Members for their earlier comments about the necessity to be wary of development and building in flood plains, if a complete area is a flood plain, a much more sophisticated approach than a blanket ban is required. In my part of Lincolnshire, we cannot just allow economic and residential development to atrophy, as there would be no job creation and no wealth creation over the next 20 or 30 years. That said, we must ensure that the detail is worked through thoroughly and properly in respect of the Environment Agency and the new structures put in place by the Bill. For example, there are 26,000 caravans between Mablethorpe and Skegness.

Moreover, different types of coastline and the different types of flooding that may affect them give rise to different needs. My constituency contains open coast that stretches from Gibraltar Point up to the Humber. That area is very different from the area of the Wash, which surrounds the coastal area of Lincolnshire but also that of Norfolk. The Environment Agency is doing very good work, particularly on offshore dredging, beach nourishment and dune maintenance. Its funding levels need to be maintained to ensure that that work continues.

I agree with everything that was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) in his excellent speech. However, I feel that we should take a more nuanced view of the information provided by the Environment Agency. It is important for the agency not to frighten people, especially when—in my view—insufficient research has been undertaken and disproportionate weight has been given to the likelihood of flooding. I have seen maps produced by the agency according to which the whole of my constituency and everyone in it would be flooded in certain circumstances. I sincerely hope that that will not happen, but the current level of uncertainty cannot continue in Lincolnshire.

That is not to say that we should not consider—as was suggested by the right hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley)—a range of options, including managed retreats. However, we should not simply accept that all agricultural land will be flooded in preference to other risk management options. The protection of people and property and of valuable and productive agricultural land is essential. I should point out that 89 per cent. of farmland in the fens is grade 1 or grade 2. It provides 37 per cent. of vegetable production, 25 per cent. of potato production, and 17 per cent. of sugar beet production, and employs 27,000 people. It is not waste land. It is not land that the country can do without. It also saves billions of pounds of imports and incalculable food miles, ensures food security and reduces carbon emissions. The loss of such land would have extremely detrimental consequences.

In the limited time available to me, I want to highlight the issues that I think should be examined in more detail in Committee. There clearly needs to be a review of any plans that are established, but the dates involved must be very specific, as must the synchronisation of national and local revisions, in order to remove any uncertainty. The review of the shoreline management plans and the coastal strategy is causing enormous problems in relation to economic diversification and job creation in Lincolnshire.

I hope that the Secretary of State will tell us how the proposals in the Bill relate to European Union directives, particularly the water framework directive, and what is meant by local plans being consistent with national plans. I hope that that does not mean an imposition from the centre that conflicts with local desires and priorities.

As other Members have said, internal drainage boards fulfil an integral and focused role in providing drainage to protect not just agricultural land but people and property. I was delighted to note that the Government had listened to, and acted on, the suggestions in the pre-scrutiny report from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and had withdrawn their proposals for the redefinition of responsibilities, governance and funding arrangements for the boards. However, there is continuing concern about any future plans to move to proportional membership. Relating membership to funding streams would give much more power to the county council and other local authorities and less to those who farm and produce the food. Local farmers and their representatives must continue to play a key role.

The drainage levy also needs to be examined. It used to be reimbursed 100 per cent. by central Government, but that is no longer the case. There is concern about, in particular, the possibility that boards will not be able to manage and maintain their assets and their plans for capital programmes, especially when it comes to replacing or upgrading vital pumping stations. If there is insufficient funding or—I do not think that this will happen in Lincolnshire, but it may happen elsewhere—local authorities find ways of moving funds back to other central funding mechanisms, particularly given the present macro-economic climate and the fiscal deficit, we could experience severely detrimental effects such as reduced spending on drainage, reduced maintenance of waterways, little effort to keep local rates down, and a loss of local knowledge, expertise and input.

I must inform the Secretary of State that he did not respond adequately to my intervention on the reimbursement of local authority funding. He did make the point that the cost of sustainable drainage systems will be reimbursed by central Government, but he did not go further than that, so perhaps in his winding-up speech he will put on record whether the costs of all the additional responsibilities being put on local authorities will be met by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, or whether local authorities will have to meet the costs themselves or reduce services elsewhere.

As highlighted by the Conservative party spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), there is real concern about

[Mark Simmonds]

clauses 38 and 39 and the apparent ability of the Environment Agency to override local concerns and compulsorily to purchase land that may be valuable agricultural land without there being any appeal mechanism in place. I very much hope that this will be looked at in Committee.

It is essential that the Government take into account Members' concerns, ensure that proposals are fully funded so that there is no additional burden on the council tax payer, and insist that local solutions form an integral part of all flood-risk management strategies.

8.56 pm

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Bill as a constituency MP, for reasons that I shall touch on later. However, I am also chair of the all-party group on water, and we have produced our own report—it came out slightly before "Future Water". Other Members have referred to Pitt, Cave, the price review 2009 and the Walker report. I am pleased that this Bill has been brought forward before the Christmas recess, as that gives it a strong chance of reaching the statute book, and it must do so.

This Second Reading debate is taking place in a week in which there are important discussions about the change in our climate, which we see, and different and volatile patterns in water management, flooding and drought. That the Bill is to be given a Second Reading now is also a just tribute to the recent events in Cumbria.

The Bill covers flood issues, and other Members have referred to the fact that it will enable the Environment Agency to create national flood and coastal erosion risk management strategies. Under clause 9, lead local flood authorities will be able to create flood risk management strategies. For reasons to which I referred in the Queen's Speech debate, that will be very welcome in my constituency, as it will be in all the other constituencies already mentioned in the debate. The Bill gives the EA and local authorities powers to carry out flood risk management works more easily.

In respect of drought, the Bill will enable water companies to control non-essential usage of water more easily. In particular, it contains provisions on the use of hosepipes for activities such as washing cars and gardening, which are particularly relevant in the summer months when water is scarce.

The Bill also tackles surface drainage issues. My right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) waxed lyrical about that, as other Members have done on other water matters. The Bill will enable water companies to offer relief to community groups on surface water drainage charges, which has been much campaigned for. I welcome that for my constituency, as much as other Members have done for theirs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) waxed lyrical about private sewers and sewerage—if one can wax lyrical about that topic. The mandatory build standards outlined in the Bill are greatly to be welcomed, but I heard what my hon. Friend said, and I hope that Ministers will have heard his pleas.

Other Members have mentioned a variety of other topics, and future contributors will no doubt mention still more. No doubt, a further Bill will be forthcoming in future years to deal with the need for the sort of consolidating legislation that others have advocated. That is not an excuse for failing to introduce this measure. It is narrower in scope, but it is significant, particularly at this point in the legislative cycle. If this Bill had not been introduced, my Front-Bench colleagues would have been harangued by people from all parts of the House for not doing so, especially in the context of events in Cumbria. It is good that we are getting on with these measures.

I would like the Bill to cover one issue arising from the Walker report. Hon. Members who know well the campaign of 20 years' length that I and other Members have fought would probably expect me at this point to mention the south-west's unique affordability charges. I shall mention those in passing, although the Secretary of State will be pleased to hear that that is not the issue that I expect to see in the Bill. I simply acknowledge that Walker stated:

"Having looked at the particular economic, social and geographical circumstances of the South West Water area, the review team concluded that:

Current high bills in the South West Water area relate to the poor state of the sewerage assets at privatisation".

This is to the tune of £650 million. The report continued:

"Dealing with the historic issues would address the root cause of the issue directly and could be addressed through a specific one-off adjustment or through annual transfers funded by government or, with a different set of fairness challenges, other water customers"

across the country. These are big issues that someone needs to examine. Anna Walker rightly said:

"Ofwat would be best placed to consider the options for implementing a one-off or other adjustment, and advising ministers accordingly".

I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), for having referred this speedily to the regulator, so that it can get on with examining the matter.

However, the issue that I wish to discuss in the minutes available to me has been raised by a number of other Members—I am talking about water debt. Unpaid water bills last year resulted in water debt of more than £1.25 billion, which was an increase of more than 13 per cent. on the previous year. About 44 per cent. of household water debt is held by customers in rented accommodation and a high proportion is a result of what the industry terms as "leavers"—people who have gone. There is no requirement on tenants or landlords to provide information on the user of the water—the person responsible for the water charges.

The final report of the Walker review recommends:

"As a priority, the Water Industry Act 1991 should be amended to provide for a named customer and clarify who is responsible for paying the water bill; the 'liable person' should be the property owner unless they discharge their liability to the water company by providing tenancy information correctly and in a timely manner".

That recommendation could help to deal with the significant problem of debt from household customers, which costs the rest of us, including many low-income customers in my constituency and across the United Kingdom, £12 on every bill.

Debt in the energy sector is about one fifth of that in the water sector, despite the considerably higher bills. In comparison, the levels of debt in the electricity and gas sectors have remained broadly static, according to Ofgem.

The number of energy customers repaying a debt at the end of 2008 was 1.3 million in respect of electricity and 0.8 million in respect of gas. In the water sector, more than 5 million customers are in debt, which suggests that as well as there being some people who struggle to pay those bills, particularly in my water area, many simply will not pay.

There is something that can be done about it: we can give better powers to the companies to follow up those debts. A key problem is knowing who to bill, especially with short-term private rental properties. Landlords could be required to provide information on their tenants and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will listen to the number of views that have been expressed on both sides of the House. The Government as well as water users who are paying for this debt could benefit from the measure, simply because there will have to be an interim review to take account of the expected investment of taking on private sewers—I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood has returned to his seat. The cost will be considerable and has not been factored into PR09, and there is therefore a win-win situation for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State if he ensures that by the time we get around to such an interim review, the matter of debt is on its way to being resolved by what should be a fairly straightforward amendment to the Bill.

9.6 pm

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I am sorry that I missed the first two speeches of the debate, including that of the Secretary of State, but I was in the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice. I want to make a few brief comments arising out of the catastrophic floods in many parts of my constituency in 2008. Of course, we had a rather worrying reminder of them in 2009, which was fortunately not so bad.

The catastrophe was worst in Rothbury. Most people were aware of the situation in Morpeth, of course, because it featured so much on the national television, but in Rothbury large numbers of people were out of their homes for many months as a result of the floods. Other communities, such as Powburn, Warkworth, Kirknewton and Felton, were affected. Many farms and farm businesses were flooded, with nearly 1,000 animal carcases requiring removal. Many roads were blocked and communities in the Ingram valley were virtually cut off.

I want to emphasise the significance of the key element of the Bill, which I see as the role of the Environment Agency in taking the lead in dealing with the management of floods and with the flood threat. At times, that would not have been easy to say, because the Environment Agency has not always been popular in my constituency, particularly when people have seen it as the body that stopped them doing the simple practical things that they felt would reduce the flood risk to their properties, such as moving gravel banks or putting in barriers. However, as a consequence of what happened in the floods in our region, the agency has changed its approach in a helpful way and has combined its efforts with those of other agencies to move things forward.

Nothing is achieved in this area unless a wide range of bodies work together. Natural England is crucial, because the body that was refusing consent for practical works was often not really the Environment Agency; it was relaying the views of Natural England. Initially, Natural England seemed distant from the whole process, but as we got it into joint meetings and meetings with local communities, it began to realise the importance of listening to local people, who could often tell its representatives a great deal that they did not know about the sites of special scientific interest and flood phenomena in the area.

The local authority, Northumberland county council, has a key role both as the highways authority and through its flood responsibilities. So do the national park authority and local people. It is only when we get all those people together, as we have done in village halls and school halls in places such as Ingram and Rothbury, that we can make some progress. People start to have confidence in each other and in the contribution that they can make.

It is important that there should be an appeal mechanism against some of the very controversial decisions that will have to be taken on flood alleviation measures. If a farmer could lose large areas of land, for example, when floods take place—because of deliberate flooding of an agricultural area—there has to be some appeal mechanism to ensure that that is a sensible decision and that the terms offered to the farmer are reasonable.

Generally speaking, it is important that we have a strong lead body that is prepared to take action, because we need large-scale flood alleviation schemes, as are planned for the River Wansbeck, although they are not yet approved for funding. We will also need such schemes on the River Coquet, if Rothbury is to be protected. Alongside those bigger schemes, however, we will need many small, practical, local measures in places such as Rothbury, the Ingram valley and the Glendale area that will significantly reduce the flood risk faced by particular groups of houses. Those small measures require much more modest financing than the major flood alleviation schemes and the big defence works, which can be funded in only a limited number of places where a significant amount of property is affected. It is crucial that organisations work together to bring forward such schemes, and there are genuine signs that all the key authorities in Northumberland are showing that willingness. There is still momentum behind the efforts to recover from the last round of flooding and to prevent a similar impact in the future, and I am determined that that momentum and co-operation should be maintained.

9.10 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), who made a measured and passionate contribution that was based on the experiences of his constituency.

It is a pleasure, as secretary of the all-party group on flood prevention, to make a modest contribution to the debate. We might have heard the last words on this subject from my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping)—the same applies to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack)—but each speech was certainly a tour de force that contributed to our proceedings.

In my 13 years in Parliament, my name has, to my knowledge, been mentioned only once in Cabinet. My sources tell me that a slide presentation was made to the Cabinet earlier this year on flood defences and the work

[Mr. John Grogan]

of the Environment Agency. Perhaps minds were beginning to wander by slide 27, but then they reached the final slide, and who should appear—modesty does not forbid me from saying—but the hon. Member for Selby, sitting on top of the flood defences in Selby on the occasion of their opening. Those flood defences are worth £18 million and protect 3,000 people. I am told by my informant that one or two members of the Cabinet made comments on that last slide; I do not know what they said, but perhaps it was how well deserved the money was, given my constant record of support for Ministers over the past decade.

In return for such confidence from Ministers, I put on record that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his predecessors have ensured that there has been a continual increase in flood expenditure over the years, which has not always been easy. While I take on board all the criticisms that have been made about the current insurance arrangements, some European countries do not have any insurance arrangements at all, so the maintenance of our arrangements represents an achievement, although I wish that the insurance industry was much better at enforcing the terms of the codes. It was also crucial that the Bill came before the House before Christmas so that it could make progress, and Ministers are to be commended on those three issues.

I want to make three points about the Bill, all of which have been referred to, although perhaps not in detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood talked about the regional flood defence committees. It is important that those committees continue, so I am a little alarmed by clauses 22 to 26, which deal with such committees. The functions of the committees will be changed and they will become more advisory and less executive. Ministers will also take greater powers to appoint the committees' members. At the moment, about half the membership of a committee is made up of local authority members chosen by individual local authorities. If we are to give local authorities much more responsibility for local management and co-ordination, the least that we can do is maintain their influence.

There is no evidence to suggest that that influence has been malign at a regional level. One marvellous phrase in the Government response to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is:

"the Department wishes to strengthen these committees by ensuring their members are of the right calibre and standing and able to provide effective local input."

I read that as meaning that the man from Whitehall knows best who should represent local authorities on the regional flood defences committees. Alternatively, perhaps it is a way of ensuring that the local authorities are unable to have a good block vote.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State came up to Yorkshire some years ago, and since then he has become an honorary Yorkshireman and a champion of local democracy. When he looks at this matter, I am sure that he will realise that it will be much better if Yorkshire's regional flood defence committee makes the final sign-off on flood defence schemes and so on, and not some anonymous bureaucrat in Whitehall.

My second point is again inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood. I may go a little further than he did, although I am not about to suggest any windfall taxes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) proposed. That must be a first for him, but I shall be measured in my remarks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood suggested that water companies, however they are regulated or owned in the future, could have a greater role to play with regard to SUDS. I think that he is on to something there, because the water companies' greater role in terms of private sewers and so on means that they have the engineering experience needed for SUDS. It would take many local authorities a long time to build up that expertise, so there is a logic in the suggestion that water companies and water authorities should have a greater say about SUDS. A strong case can be made for that.

My third and final point has to do with the basic thrust of the Bill. Those of us who have been affected by flooding know what it is like. There are 88 settlements in Selby, and well over half of them have been flooded at some time during my years as the local MP. I am sure that all of us representing areas that flood have seen people suffering terribly when their houses get flooded. We will have looked at all the various agencies—the Environment Agency, the local authorities, the drainage boards and the water authorities—and wondered which of them was in charge.

I play a small and modest part in the co-ordinating role in my area. Every six months, I chair a meeting at which representatives from the villages affected by flooding have half an hour to talk about the problem as they see it. We sit there all day and between us we try and co-ordinate action and so on.

It is quite a tough job, and I shall give the House one example, involving the village of Saxton in the heart of Yorkshire. A few years ago, the village was repeatedly flooded by surface water flooding. The people there made good use of the discretionary funding from the regional flood defence committee and they put together, from various sources, a pot of money amounting to nearly £100,000. However, they then discovered that improving the drainage in the village meant that they had first to get round the pipes and other equipment blocking the drains that had been put in place by the various local utilities.

We are now making an appeal to the various utilities to remove their services by the time that England play their first game in the World cup against the United States on 12 June next year. All but one have agreed to do that, so, if the funding bodies keep the funding in place, we will be able to put the scheme in place. We are also appealing to the National Grid Company, which has not yet fulfilled a deal that it made with a local farmer to fix the drainage in one of his fields. That shows that an awful lot of co-ordination is involved just for one village. For that reason, the task that local authorities are to take on, and the expertise that they will need, should not be underestimated.

I compare the task facing local authorities with the one that faced them when, in the early days of this Government, the co-ordination of crime prevention became a local authority function for the first time. Local authorities had to do lots of things that they had not done before, and they also had to talk to lots of people whom they had never talked to before. That is the scale of the challenge that we are facing with this Bill.

The all-party flood prevention group was formed after the experience of the floods of 2000. I was a relatively new MP at the time, and I will never forget watching hundreds of troops pass sandbags along a line one Saturday night in a desperate attempt to keep Selby's flood defences from failing. That brought it home to me how big an issue this is for many communities, and I am very pleased that the Bill is before the House tonight. May it have a fair wind in the new year.

9.19 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to make a short contribution, following my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan). The Bill is important. As a member of the Select Committee, I could make an argument for delay so that we got the totality of the Bill, but it is important that we prioritise the flooding aspects of the earlier Floods and Water Bill and deal with some aspects of water management.

I approach the Bill from three standpoints. First, the Select Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny was a detailed exercise. I have tried to read the papers. We have done our homework and carried out our scrutiny role properly. Secondly, as my two constituency neighbours explained in graphic detail, Gloucestershire will be renowned for the 2007 floods. All of us who were involved in those dreadful days will always remember what that meant for some people and their representatives. As we know, some of the problems continue. I was dealing with floods only a few weeks ago. Thankfully, they were not major but they were still significant. The problem is not ever-present, but it has not gone away.

As a result, my third point of influence is through the work of the people who formed action groups. I shall mention four, although there are more in my constituency—the Painswick Stream group, the Slad Brook group, the Bridgend group in Stonehouse, where I live, and the Shorn Brook group in Hardwicke. Each of those groups has lobbied me and kept me directly in touch with all developments. I have learned that the problem is ongoing. More than anything, we must be honest with people. I shall say more about that shortly.

To me, there are four aspects that we should try to bring together. There are issues of leadership, particularly leadership from the centre, but also at a local level, funding, responsibility and deliverability. The two Pitt reports did an immense service by highlighting a series of recommendations. Pleasingly, the Government are turning the clock forward and bringing into statute the very things that Michael Pitt asked us to do, although most of the recommendations did not require legislation.

At the centre of these efforts we have the double-headed hydra—the Environment Agency and the lead local authority. The decision-making mechanism can be criticised for its vertical structure, but as other hon. Members have said, unless there is clarity, there will always be confusion about who does what.

I welcome the way in which the Government have set about trying to deal with the charging of voluntary and community groups. Some of us felt that that campaign might not be successful, but the Government have listened. Although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) said, we must make the campaign stronger, I am proud that I can go back to my Stroud groups and say that we have listened and we will do the right thing.

I shall expand on three points that have been mentioned. First, I spend my life trying to persuade people that, far from being a problem, internal drainage boards are a valuable addition to the way in which we organise things at a local level. I think I understand what the Government want us to do through the legislation—to widen the IDBs' realm of activity and to deepen their ability to co-ordinate their activities so that an IDB does not need to be too locally based. We miss a trick if we do not recognise the value of those people on the IDBs, given the way in which they can apply their skills, knowledge and, certainly, local understanding to any flooding situation. I do not mind levying the cost at all. I will go to any of my parish councils and tell them that we should levy a charge so that those IDBs can function, because the preparatory and preventive work that they are so able to carry out is very important.

We have ducked riparian ownership, because it is an immense issue. We have not mentioned it, because, despite including it in the draft Bill, we cavilled even there at the possible repercussions of taking away responsibility from owners. We cannot duck the issue completely, however, and I shall concentrate on one simple aspect that has caused me enormous problems—when the riparian owner has not only failed to do the work, but has been obstructive and unhelpful, and other people have been flooded as a result. The riparian owner may have barricaded their land, built it up so that other people subsequently flood or, in one case of which I know, just refused to operate the sluice gates. When one sees a neighbour being flooded after they have desperately tried to get on to somebody else's property, which has barbed wire around it and barred gates, that is the most depressing thing. I therefore want the Bill to make it clear that we can prosecute such people and use enforcement, so that they at least get the message that that is not good neighbourliness. They should be held responsible for either their inactivity or their improper actions.

We have also skated over the issue of critical infrastructure. People have mentioned the railways, and they are crucial to the issue, because they are a huge conduit for water. If we do not include the railway system and Network Rail, in particular, alongside the water boards, the Environment Agency and all the other public bodies, we will fail to realise how important they are. It has not always been easy to get such bodies to take responsibility. The situation has improved in my area, but some households flooded when the railway organisations failed to take responsibility for their cuttings, so I shall look very carefully at how we can co-ordinate activities and make the strategies more coherent.

I shall leave my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to puzzle over my final point. It is about our raising expectations by putting in place a strategic plan, which in this case is the local surface water management plan. I am very pleased that the Government have encouraged the 70-odd areas that are working through the issue to come up with such plans, but once they are in place it behoves us to find the money to deal with any subsequent problems.

There is a need for honesty. If we are to put in place a plan and the money to fund the action, we should tell people. But, if that is not going to happen for any reason, we must, as I said in an intervention earlier, tell people and households that they will have to look at

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their own resilience and take their own measures because we cannot guarantee that, in every eventuality, they will be safe from flooding.

That may be a sour note on which to end my contribution, but the worst thing of all was when we met people who thought they had been promised protection, and it was not possible to deliver that. We need complete honesty in how we go about these matters.

9.29 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): I congratulate all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). I congratulate the Secretary of State on his staying power. The one missing element in the debate was the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies); we wish him very well in his negotiations on fisheries. I look forward to working with him constructively in the forthcoming Committee proceedings. I echo the warm reception that the Bill has received across the House, although all those who contributed took a cautious approach, and I think that there is room for improvement.

The Secretary of State set the tone by relaying the events of the summer 2007 floods. I echo his tributes, and those of all hon. Members, to the emergency services—the police, fire and ambulance services, as well as the Environment Agency, local authorities and the armed forces, and in Cumbria, most recently, the mountain and fell rescue service. In the visits that I have made, I have been struck by the importance of the visibility of those who walk the streets, particularly those from the Environment Agency; they wear a uniform with a badge. It is also important that we recognise the resilience of local communities, most recently in Workington, Cockermouth and Keswick in Cumbria, as well as parts of the Copeland constituency.

The Vale of York is distinctive in that it is about 65 per cent. flood plain; sadly, we are all too experienced in serious flooding. I should like to declare an interest in that I hope that the Secretary of State will soon allow our modest little scheme for Thirsk to go ahead through the Environment Agency. I would like to hold him to account for a comment that he made about the additional funds that were given in 2007 and, most recently, for the Cumbrian floods. Following the summer 2007 floods, our exercise proved that £50 million in out-of-pocket expenses was incurred by local authorities. I have questioned the Secretary of State and his hon. Friends about that. I hope that Cumbria and other communities that may well suffer in future will not be left with such high expenses.

I should like to draw together some of the strands of the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who spoke very eloquently, referred to the definition of risk and the continuing role of adaptation. I would like to add to the list that he and others gave. We need a review not only of bridges and other critical infrastructure, which I understand has not yet been completed, but of all main roads and trunk roads. The M1 came very close to closing as a result of the summer 2007 floods. In a visit to the constituency of the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), I was shocked to see the damage to one small road in Cockermouth, before a full audit was done.

I think that everyone welcomes the strategic overview and role that the Environment Agency will be given, but it is very prescriptive. The fact that there is no appeals mechanism in relation to some of its prescriptive roles and powers is worthy of exploration in Committee. We must also consider how the draft strategy that the agency is to publish will link in with other elements. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) talked about the need for a more integrated approach between the county and unitary authorities, and said that the district councils must not be excluded because they were the planning authorities. I am a particular fan of the internal drainage boards. I must declare that I am a vice-president of the Association of Drainage Authorities, an appointment of which I am particularly proud. Those boards have the necessary local expertise and skills, and, recently, the funds. We need to explore ways in which the internal drainage boards, the Environment Agency and the water companies can work more closely together.

The Secretary of State may think that I am playing devil's advocate here, but while my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State set out clearly our role and that of local communities, I believe that there are certain matters on which the water companies have a further role to play. One is sustainable urban drainage systems, and I hope that the Secretary of State is minded to agree to our proposal to adopt the Scottish law definition of SUDS. I do not see any reason for having one definition north of the border and another south of the border, given that it is comprehensive. It is important that we identify where SUDS are, who currently owns them and who maintains them. That has not yet been achieved in the Bill, and we need an audit. From a cursory first reading of the Bill, I believe that the water companies have a prominent role to play in taking the lead responsibility for SUDS once we have established those facts. They have the skills and resources to do that in a way that local authorities may not.

I entirely endorse what the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) said about sewers, which we cannot talk about often enough. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) for his work on sewers when he was a Minister. We need a definite plan and proposal for the adoption of private drains and sewers, and again, we need an audit so that we know where they are and who owns them. It comes as a bolt from the blue when householders find out that their drains are private. They often find out only because their drains are flooded. We need a deadline for that, and I hope that the Secretary of State will oblige.

It is right that the water companies should adopt private drains and sewers and be made responsible for them, but regrettably the Secretary of State and the Department are completely wrong in their sums. I do not believe that the savings that they have estimated are accurate or that local authorities are currently paying out anything like the sums that they believe. We need to be grown-up and revisit that, and water companies need to be prepared and know exactly what they are in for.

Pitt was extremely clear about the ending of the automatic right to connect. The regulations under planning policy statement 25, which a number of hon. Members have mentioned, cover building on flood plains. I believe that water companies should have the badge of statutory consultees, but also that their advice, like that of the

Environment Agency, should be acted upon. There should be some comeback when a planning authority proceeds to ignore that advice, if water companies are adopted as statutory consultees under the Bill.

To recap, I believe that water companies have a key role to play in sustainable urban drainage systems, planning changes to end the automatic right to connect and the adoption of private drains and sewers. I welcome the opening up of the tendering process to bodies other than water companies in clause 36, but I do not understand the logic of excluding water companies. I hope that the Secretary of State will review that.

There have been a number of contributions about sustainable development, natural alleviation schemes of water retention and working with nature. I pay tribute to the pilot scheme that has been authorised in Pickering. I have aspirations to represent Pickering in a future Parliament, so it is particularly close to my heart. Other pilots have also been rolled out, including by the right hon. Member for Scunthorpe in his previous ministerial capacity. If the Pickering scheme is deemed to work, with mini-dams along the railway line, trees upstream and bottlenecks removed downstream, it will be a great way forward and other parts of the country will benefit.

I have great sympathy with those who have said that river catchment area management needs to be examined more closely, and there is work that we can do on that. As regards the crucial role of the fire and rescue service and statutory responsibility, which the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and others mentioned, Pitt recommendation 39 was very clear that the Government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue, with fire and rescue authorities playing a leading role, underpinned as necessary by a statutory duty. We are not quite there yet, and I hope that the Secretary of State sets out exactly where we are when he responds.

The Bill's provisions for information sharing should be more specific. There should be much more access to the various mappings. I understand that the Secretary of State is prepared to open Ordnance Survey mappings, but what about those of the Met Office, the insurance industry, district councils and water companies? However, there should be a provision setting out confidentiality criteria—the confidentiality of anything that is commercially sensitive should be respected.

Resource, funding and skills are causing great alarm—witness the contributions made this evening. We need to look again at what the balance between local government, local authorities, the Environment Agency and water companies should be. The Secretary of State is aware that I do not believe that either the Environment Agency or the local authorities can find the necessary resources from their existing funds. That matter is causing great concern, and I hope that he addresses it this evening.

On resilience and the British Standards Institution's issuing of the kitemark, if a product is proved to be fit for purpose, will a householder or business property owner be able to sue the BSI or the product maker when a product allows water in? What comeback is there and how can we ensure that home owners and property owners in general have the confidence to increase their resilience? What happens if a product is demonstrated to be unfit for purpose? A great consensus is building on amending building regulations to increase resilience to future floods. It is not acceptable that home owners are returning to properties that still have electrical sockets at ground level. When a property is prone to future floods, that simply stores up more problems.

The Government need to be much clearer what priorities there are between the arbitrary house building policy of one Department and DEFRA's guidance not to build in inappropriate places. The Secretary of State needs to be much clearer on the relationship between the Environment Agency's strategic overview and the regional spatial plans—my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) and others showed what future flooding problems there could be in their constituencies.

On insurance, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said in setting out the Conservative position at the beginning of the debate that there was a discrepancy between the £1 billion that the Government would be paying next year and the £1.5 billion for which the insurance industry is still calling. The Government need to address that, the need for accessible insurance for all, which the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) and others addressed, and the fact that premiums and excesses are going up. In my constituency, excesses are well in excess of £10,000. They need to be affordable; otherwise, the taxpayer is left with the cost of picking up uninsurable losses. I should like the Secretary of State to go further and to write a duty into the Bill—we have prepared a little amendment to help him in this regard—for the Environment Agency to come forward with an annual programme for maintenance, which will be reported to both Houses and debated, to ensure that it is at all times maintaining and dredging the main water courses, so that as long as internal drainage boards are doing their bit, the water does not back up.

I should like to take credit for one measure. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs threatened to amend the so-called rain tax, but the Government have done so in clause 42. That was included only after the official Opposition persisted in saying that we would act if the Government failed to do so—*[Interruption.]* I am delighted that the House supports us.

We still need a full audit of critical infrastructure. I deplore the fact that the flood risk regulations have gone through without proper scrutiny and, I understand, without proper consultation. With the reservation that several issues that have been raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House this evening are worthy of further debate in Committee, we wish the Bill a fair wind and we hope that it will be even better than it is now once it leaves Committee.

9.45 pm

Hilary Benn: With the leave of the House, I wish to respond to the debate. It has been an extremely good one, because without exception hon. Members have spoken with local knowledge, insight and a clarity of commitment to using this legislation to deal with the problems of flooding and enable society to cope with it better.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for his support for the Bill. I was slightly puzzled by his reference to the emergency response in 2007 because having visited a lot of places and talked to a lot of people, I have to say that it does not reflect my view or, in fairness, what Sir Michael Pitt had to say. On the balance between the national

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and the local, about which the hon. Gentleman and several others spoke, I hope that on reflection they will agree that the Bill does provide the necessary flexibility to allow the right arrangements to be put in place. The hon. Gentleman asked about Cave, and—as I am sure he is aware—we are consulting on those recommendations. I thought that the example he gave of a local community protecting itself was a really good one, and shows clearly that it can be done without the need for additional legislation.

On national infrastructure, I can inform the hon. Gentleman and other hon Members who raised this issue, that the Cabinet Office has now screened nearly 1,000 critical national infrastructure sites and identified 171 across nine sectors that are in areas that could be flooded by rivers or the sea. The lead Departments in all cases are preparing sector resilience plans, which will be produced by the end of this year. If time allowed, I could give several specific examples of steps that have been taken, but I shall refer to just one. The National Grid has invested more than £1 million in flood defence capability, including buying 1.2 km of flood defence barriers, which it can take to places that are under threat.

On the scrutiny of the national strategy, it would be for the Select Committee to decide what it wished to do. I always welcome its interest and attention. On the water framework directive, a statutory instrument establishing a power for the Environment Agency to improve the physical characteristics of water bodies was laid on 1 December, to come into force on 22 December this year.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) spoke with great authority because of his experience, and he made a powerful point about the need to strike a balance, including when it comes to agricultural land. Those who argue that greater protection should be given—and I understand the arguments that are made—must be equally honest about where the resources, which will always amount to a certain sum, will be found to achieve that.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) said that he did not want to be churlish just as I was about to intervene and say that I thought he was being a tad churlish in some of his comments. On private sewers—which my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) also mentioned—we already have the powers to make the change, and the House should not worry about that. Yes, there will be a small cost, but the argument for it is that this is in effect a national insurance scheme to protect householders who have no idea that they would have to bear the cost—

Martin Horwood: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hilary Benn: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I was generous in giving way to him earlier, and I want to try to respond to as many points as possible.

Insurance is a problem, and we have to have an answer to it. On more precise flood warnings, we do not need legislation to do that. Indeed, as the capacity of the flood forecasting centre at the Met Office improves and gives better and more accurate flood warnings, the House may rest assured that those will be issued.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall), who has played a significant role in highlighting the unfairness of surface water charges and gave some striking examples from his area concerning United Utilities. As for who will be covered, he will have seen clause 42(4)(c), and of course guidance will be issued as well.

I hope that today was not the last time that the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) talks on such matters, because he has chaired the Select Committee with distinction, enormous insight and great courtesy. I echo his thanks to the staff of his Committee. I thought that he spoke particularly eloquently about the need to be straight with each other. That has been a theme in this debate, and I agree with it. On the floods directive, I can assure him that we will, when necessary, stitch the bits together so that if changes are made to the Bill, they can be reflected in the regulations. Bridges should certainly be regularly inspected. He also talked about informing members of the public. One of the striking things about this matter—this came across in Sir Michael Pitt's report—is that we all have a personal responsibility. When a flood warning is issued, it means something and we have to pay attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood reminded us that the internal drainage boards are good in some places, but not so good in others. Regional flood defence committees have an important role to play, and I agree with him completely. I liked his phrase about the environment acting as a sponge. He, too, said in respect of coastal erosion that we have to be honest with each other, and that includes everybody involved taking responsibility for the problem, because we cannot get into a situation where people start to say, "Well, the EA is the harbinger of doom and bringer of bad news." This is everyone's problem, and we all have to pitch in and do something about it.

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) was kind in his expressions of appreciation. When it comes to building on flood plains, the responsibility is clear: it rests with the local planning authority. The question is whether we can guard against flood risk. Indeed, we meet and debate here on a flood plain that is protected by the Thames barrier. On alternative supplies, he will be aware that the Mythe defences have now been reinforced and that Walham has a flood defence. However, there is an alternative water supply, as we saw with the distribution of bottled water, which worked well. There were problems with the bowsers, but those were eventually sorted out.

I know from the terrific constituency work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) that when he speaks about the importance of community consultation and involvement, he means it and lives it. I have seen that for myself through the great work done in his constituency dealing with contaminated land. The most striking thing about that was getting people involved. That is another aspect of sharing responsibility. If we say, "Hey, we've got a problem. What are we going to do about it?", people tend to respond, as he knows well. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) made exactly the same point. On insurance, we need ideas and to think about it, and my right hon. Friend made a powerful point about affordability.

The hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) was right to talk about prevention. I say to her what I said to the Opposition spokesman. The Bill has the flexibility to enable local authorities to work together in a way that will suit them. In the end, it is up to the local authorities to enter into the spirit of that flexible provision in the Bill and to make it happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked about training for fire service staff. We have offered assistance with physical material by ensuring that the right training is in place. He is right to say that those who are putting their lives at risk should have the right equipment and knowledge to undertake their important work.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) talked about the need for a better understanding of risks and local warnings. Better technology will allow that. He is also right to say that we will have to think about bridge design, especially in the light of experiences in Cumbria. The right hon. Member for Fylde made this point as well, and the natural hazards team is looking at that very question.

I pay tribute to the role that my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) has played in the current difficult circumstances, as well as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), who really has been at the sharp end and has been quite magnificent. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland made a powerful case for accountability. Let me assure him that the water companies will be under a duty to act consistently with the national flood strategy. They will be required to co-operate with flood risk authorities, and the Secretary of State will be able to direct water companies or other authorities to carry out flood risk management functions if they fail to do so themselves.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds) has more reason that just about anybody in the Chamber to be concerned about coastal erosion and rising sea levels. It is not a question of the EA trying to frighten anybody; there is a problem and we have to share it. The important point is the spirit in which that is entered into.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) talked about the Walker review. She is a powerful advocate for her constituents in the south-west and chairs the all-party group on water with great energy. She raised the question of arrears, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe, and if she is on the Committee, I suspect that it will be returned to.

I was glad to hear what the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) said about the change that had taken place, because that was where a different approach had been adopted. We will make provisions for appeals, through the relevant provisions in clauses 38 and 39, based on existing provisions in the Water Resources Act 1991.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) chairs the all-party group on flood prevention, also with distinction. I agree with him about regional flood defence committees. As for water companies and sustainable drainage systems, the body giving the approval should also have the responsibility to maintain, because that will make it think about the decision. However, water companies will also be statutory consultees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud talked about riparian owners. Assets will be registered under clause 21, which will enable the lead local flood authority to identify the cause of a problem and speed its resolution, should it arise. On the choices that have to be made, they will be a combination of collective defence, where possible, and greater resistance and resilience, but also individuals thinking about how they can protect the properties in which they live.

I pay tribute to the careful interest that the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) takes in these matters and the expertise with which she contributed from the Dispatch Box this evening. On the expenses faced by local authorities, as she will be aware, there is support under the Bellwin arrangements, which we have again extended to 100 per cent. cover above the threshold, as we did in 2007. There is also other support available, through various different schemes. On the role of the Environment Agency, I would simply say to her that—how shall I put it?—when it comes to responsibility, one person's prescription is another person's clarity. The Bill is right to make it clear where the EA has responsibilities. The SUDS definition is the same north and south of the border, and existing SUDS are likely to be designated under clause 30 and schedule 1.

Finally, I want to come back to the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, who speaks for the Opposition. This is a week in which the world's leaders have been gathering in Copenhagen to try to bring home an agreement, which is essential if we are to deal with the consequences of a changing climate, one of which—flooding—we have been talking about this evening. This is a world in which we will have to live within our means. That includes nature's ability to accommodate human beings—our settlement and our activity—and we will have to do that with due respect for nature's power. What we are doing this evening represents a really important step towards helping the people who have been so badly affected by flooding in recent times. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

FLOOD AND WATER MANAGEMENT BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Flood and Water Management Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 21 January 2010.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed. — *(Kerry McCarthy.)*

Question agreed to.

FLOOD AND WATER MANAGEMENT BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)).

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Flood and Water Management Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided. — *(Kerry McCarthy.)*

Question agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A).

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the motion in the name of Secretary John Denham relating to Rating and Valuation, the motion in the name of Mr Secretary Hain relating to Constitutional Law and the motion in the name of Ms Harriet Harman relating to the Electoral Commission. — *(Kerry McCarthy.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

RATION AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Chargeable Amounts) (England) Regulations 2009, which were laid before this House on 25 November, be approved. — *(Kerry McCarthy.)*

Question agreed to.

Constitutional Law

10 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): I beg to move,

That the draft National Assembly for Wales (Legislative Competence) (Welsh Language) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 10 November, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.

This legislative competence order has already been approved by the National Assembly, and I would like to put on record at the outset this Government's strong commitment to the Welsh language. I hope that my personal support for its future development speaks for itself. Parts of my constituency are strongly Welsh speaking, and when Neath hosted the National Eisteddfod in 1994, I gave a welcoming address speaking in Welsh—after considerable coaching, as my Welsh is limited. I wanted to do that to make a statement of support, and I was grateful for the way in which it was received. When I was Welsh Education Minister in 1998, I extended Welsh as a compulsory subject—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Secretary of State. I would be grateful if Members who are leaving the Chamber would do so quickly and quietly. I know that those who are remaining will not want to converse privately, but to attend to the business of the House.

Mr. Hain: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When I was Welsh Education Minister in 1998, I extended Welsh as a compulsory subject to the GCSE-age cohort, in the face of hostile criticism in some quarters.

Hon. Members will know that draft legislative competence orders—LCOs—are not normally debated on the Floor of the House, but I was determined that that should happen in this instance. The Welsh language plays a central, fundamental role in Welsh society, and in the day-to-day lives of many people in Wales. I believe that the unique importance of this LCO merits all Members of this House having the opportunity to debate it.

Our debate here this evening follows on from the approval of this LCO last week in the House of Lords, from the Welsh Grand Committee debate on the proposals on 14 October and from the scrutiny undertaken by the Welsh Affairs Committee, the Lords Constitution Committee and a Committee of the National Assembly. I would like to commend the Welsh Affairs Committee in particular for its first-rate scrutiny of this LCO, and for its role in building the broad consensus that now exists around it. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis) for his meticulous leadership of the Committee. I have been heartened by that consensus: a broad church of interest groups, together with those whom the LCO might affect, now supports it in principle. This provides a solid foundation on which the Assembly Government can build in developing proposals for an Assembly Measure to take forward the language.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that the process that he has adopted on this occasion ought to set a precedent for Governments of all colours, in the sense that, once a matter that is clearly in the domain of the Assembly—in

spirit and also, to some extent, in words—has been decided by the Assembly, it would not be in order for us to overturn it? Does he therefore acknowledge that we are putting a marker in the sand for how these important decisions might be made in the future, and how they should be respected when they come from Cardiff?

Mr. Hain: In this case, we have seen how detailed scrutiny—undertaken primarily by this Parliament, either in this House or through the Welsh Affairs Committee—has improved a draft piece of legislation that would not otherwise have been in such good shape. That is the way I would respond to the hon. Gentleman's question.

The Government's approach to this LCO has been informed by four principles. The first is that it is logical and appropriate for the National Assembly for Wales to be able to legislate on the Welsh language. The nation's legislature is surely the natural home for making laws in relation to the language.

The second principle is that the order builds on the firm foundations of the Welsh Language Act 1993. That landmark legislation ensured that organisations providing services of a public nature implement schemes for carrying out some or all of their business in Welsh. These requirements now need updating better to fit new times, but the 1993 Act provides a sound basis for the focus of the LCO on key public services provided by public authorities or private companies.

Thirdly, it is crucial that as we move forward, we strike the right balance between the interests of those who use Welsh as their mother tongue and who wish to conduct their day-to-day business in the language and the large majority of people in Wales—some 80 per cent.—who do not speak Welsh.

The final principle is that any duty should be applied in a reasonable and proportionate way. This is the key point made by the Welsh Affairs Committee and it has my full support. This is particularly important in the context of ensuring that business and enterprise in Wales support these proposals. No one would want to see the private sector discouraged from investing in Wales because of burdensome Welsh language duties being inappropriately imposed on busine[illegible]. What is right in respect of a large public auth[illegible]d not necessarily be right for a smaller private s[illegible]y. What is right in Meirionnydd may not be right for Monmouthshire.

There has been a great deal of consultation on these proposals. My right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) sought the views of interested parties on the proposed order earlier this year, and I am grateful to him as he paved the way for the consensus that has now been built. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales and I have held discussions with a large number of organisations—and their representative bodies—that may be affected by subsequent Assembly measures. This engagement has been vital in helping to frame the draft LCO before us this evening.

This LCO, then, is built on firm and clear principles. It is grounded in a common- sense approach to developing the language and, in drafting it, we have responded to the very real concerns of some about its scope while at the same time meeting the pressures for change. I believe it gets right the intricate balance of interests that hon. Members will know the Welsh language engages; it builds a broad consensus on how to proceed and it works in the best interests of everyone in Wales.

The draft LCO would enable the National Assembly to legislate to promote or facilitate the use of the Welsh language and the treatment of the Welsh and English languages on a basis of equality. This is based on the wording from the Welsh Language Act 1993. It does not extend to the use of Welsh in the courts; nor would it allow the National Assembly to impose duties in relation to the Welsh language on any body other than those falling within the 10 categories listed in the order. These categories include public authorities; bodies established for specified purposes by royal charter; bodies receiving public money amounting to £400,000 or more in a financial year; and organisations providing key public services, including electricity, gas, water, post, telecoms, bus and rail services.

The LCO includes a crucial safeguard enabling bodies in these categories to challenge the imposition of Welsh language duties on grounds of reasonableness and proportionality. This is a robust safeguard against any inappropriate imposition of such duties. It ensures that the reasonableness of duties will be a key consideration in developing Assembly measures, and provides an important reassurance against disproportionate obligations being imposed on any body, and especially smaller organisations, whether they be charities or companies in business sectors such as mobile telephony or energy.

I believe this LCO puts in place a framework for the devolution of powers over the Welsh language to the Assembly, which is robust and provides for a strong and healthy future for the language by building on the achievements since 1993 in a common-sense, evolutionary way to make the language a source of pride for everyone in Wales, whether or not they speak Welsh. I commend it to the House.

10.9 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I begin by offering my condolences and, I believe, those of the whole House to the new First Minister on the untimely death of his mother, of which we heard earlier today? I am sure that everyone would wish me to pass our condolences to him.

I thank the Secretary of State for giving us the opportunity to debate the legislative competence order on the Floor of the House. It has undergone considerable amendment since it was first proposed by the Welsh Assembly and referred to the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs and the Welsh Grand Committee, and the opportunity for us to scrutinise its closing stages on the Floor of the House is very welcome. I do not intend to speak for long, because I know that many other Members wish to speak.

I am aware that accusations have been made in certain quarters. It has been claimed that the LCO has been delayed in the House, and that the Select Committee's recommendations—most of which have now been adopted—were superfluous. Indeed, that criticism has dogged the LCO process from the beginning. Those critics have argued what we are considering is a permissive power, not a Measure, and that it is not for Parliament to second-guess what may or may not be done with an LCO once it has been passed by the Assembly. Our duty, they say, is only to scrutinise whether it is appropriate for the power to be passed down.

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

It has been argued that LCOs should not be scrutinised as if they were fully fledged Measures, but it is clear that to pass down a power that had not been scrutinised by the House of Commons would defeat the object of the existence of this place, and its role and function in our legislative process. I think that the Secretary of State and I have similar views in that regard.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Is it not worrying that if it were not for the House of Commons with all its Members, and the Members of another place, there would be very little scrutiny from the 60 Members who currently inhabit the Welsh Assembly?

Mrs. Gillan: I have to say that on this occasion I agree with the Secretary of State. I think it important for LCOs to be properly scrutinised in this place. As the Order Paper makes clear, this is a constitutional matter, and it is right for it to be debated on the Floor of the House.

I think it important to give some thought to what it means to say that the passing down of a power is "appropriate". Of course, nothing seems more immediately appropriate than passing power over the Welsh language to the Welsh Assembly. The Assembly is certainly capable of exercising that power, and it is an elected body, just as the House of Commons is. I would argue, however, that what we mean by "appropriate" in this case is not whether the Assembly can do the job, but whether it makes more sense to legislate on this matter at Welsh level in the Assembly or at national level in Parliament.

As the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) once observed, and as I believe has been observed by the Secretary of State himself, it would be inappropriate to rubber-stamp the passing down of power to legislate on matters which, without proper scrutiny, could have unintended consequences. I have always believed that, and it has been the case with this LCO. As my grandmother used to say, two heads are better than one. I think that this extra scrutiny is welcome, and that it has improved the LCO greatly. It is entirely proper that, when deciding whether it is appropriate to pass down powers, we should pay careful attention to the scope of LCOs and their possible implications for the people of Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik), who appears to have left the Chamber immediately after his intervention, and also with Lord Elis-Thomas, who said that legislative proposals for the Assembly should be passed automatically. I do not believe that that is the right thing to do.

Let me turn to the detail of the order. It has certainly been greatly improved since its first draft. I pay tribute to the work of the Select Committee and its Chairman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis). It is clear that the system places a considerable burden on the Committee, and it is testimony to the dedication of all its members in all parties that they managed to do such a good job despite their immense work load. However, there are still a number of issues that I want to raise. I hope that the Secretary of State, or the Minister, can provide clarification or reassurance both for myself and for those who have raised matters with me.

The first issue is the future of the Welsh Language Board. It has been doing a first-class job in promoting the language under Meri Huws, yet no one seems to have raised what will happen to it and to the jobs involved, and I know that it was not consulted in an appropriate fashion before the LCO was promulgated by the coalition Assembly Government. I hope that the Minister will be able to shine some light on its future.

The order applies to a number of bodies outside the public sector and thus outside the scope of the Welsh Language Act 1993, including gas, electricity, water and telecoms providers. I appreciate that the intention is to allow the people in Wales to live their lives in the language of their choice, and I, too, support that aim, yet many of these companies already have some form of language scheme. The comment I have heard most often from such companies is that take-up is severely limited. For example, Wales & West Utilities Ltd identified that over the three years of operation between 2006 and 2009, in 600,000 calls to its hotline only four requests were made to converse in Welsh. Also, of 152,000 pieces of correspondence generated annually, only two requests for Welsh correspondence have been received. Surely the energies of government would be better used in encouraging private companies to adopt Welsh language schemes voluntarily than in legislating further.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Gillan: I would like to make a little more progress first.

As the Federation of Small Businesses has said, businesses will respond to customers more than to legislation, and continuing to promote the language is surely the best route to take. If a significant customer base wanted to operate in the Welsh language, companies would have every reason to do so.

Hywel Williams: The hon. Lady is intent on promoting a voluntary approach, while pointing out that that approach has not succeeded. The company's figures that she mentioned show that the Welsh language is seldom used under the voluntary approach. Can she explain that apparent contradiction?

Mrs. Gillan: I am just raising some queries which I hope the Minister will address. I think the voluntary approach has worked rather well in Wales. I have just given an example of one of the submissions to the Secretary of State, and I am asking the Minister whether he thinks we should continue to promote such schemes, rather than take the legislative route that will be available under the LCO.

Imposing a stringent language scheme on bodies, regardless of whether they already have some form of language scheme, would clearly result in additional cost. The consequences are clear: either the cost will be passed on to the consumer in the form of higher bills, or companies may choose not to operate in Wales at all. As a result, Welsh consumers may be deprived of choice and competition.

The Mobile Broadband Group has expressed the concern that resources are limited in the current economic climate, and said that priority should be given to extending coverage across Wales of a service that is consistently in

demand by Welsh consumers. BT has called for action to encourage uptake of existing services, rather than have new legislation that could be planned by the Assembly Government. It does not want to supply Welsh language services by law and compulsion, but is happy to continue to do so voluntarily. I hope that the Minister will address that in his winding-up speech.

Companies supplying liquid propane to rural areas, such as Calor Gas Ltd, have also raised the objection that their main competitors—suppliers of oil and coal—are exempt from the order. Any additional costs put on companies such as Calor would have to be absorbed into the cost of the liquefied petroleum gas they supply, forcing up prices, which would hit Welsh families, especially in rural areas, at a time when the fuel poverty rate in Wales stands at 340,000 households. Furthermore, the order applies not only to multinationals but to some small companies, and as the Secretary of State has said, it must be ensured that the extra cost does not risk crippling otherwise successful and growing organisations. For that reason, I welcome the test of reasonableness and proportionality that has been inserted in the order in its final form.

The order specifies that before a duty can be imposed on any organisation, there must be a clear right to appeal. I agree with that sentiment, but there are implications to the proposal. First, it sounds as though a significant bureaucracy will be necessary not only to enforce Welsh language legislation, but to deal with any appeals. I wonder where the finance is coming from to fund the appeals process, because I believe the order attracts no accompanying extra funding—perhaps the Minister could confirm that. Secondly, small organisations might feel that the process of appeal is simply too arduous to consider even operating in Wales. I am not aware of any impact assessment having been carried out, so could the Minister reassure me that such an impact assessment will be carried out, as this issue has been raised by more than one company?

The Welsh Language Act has consistently encouraged participation in Welsh language schemes on a voluntary basis, and over the years much good will has been engendered towards the language. I pay tribute to Lord Wyn Roberts, because he really is the champion of the Welsh language; I am proud to say that it is a Conservative who has protected, promoted and advanced the language with such sensitivity and wisdom. There are many people in Wales who are not Welsh speaking but who, nevertheless, feel an affinity with the language, and it will be a sad day if that sentiment and good will is damaged by higher bills or a reduction in choice and fewer services, and by a resentment that could come from compulsion.

I should also mention, once again, the £400,000 threshold on public money received in consecutive years. I do so, first, because the figure seems to be merely the original arbitrary figure, just doubled. Will the Minister confirm what consultation took place over where to set the threshold, either in the original order or in the version before us, and where the figure has come from? Has it been plucked out of the air?

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Gillan: I will not give way, because so many people wish to speak; I just want to finish making my points.

Secondly, it is unclear for how long a duty would be imposed on these organisations. I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify whether the organisations are merely covered in the years in which they receive the requisite amount of public money or in perpetuity. Could he also clarify why it was felt necessary to include the Bank of England in the order? To date, I have seen no justification for its having been explicitly included. This legislative competence order, in its final form, has certainly addressed some of the concerns raised by both Labour and Conservative Members about the original draft. Certain questions remain, however, and I hope that he will address them in his closing remarks.

On the face of it, it appears appropriate for the Assembly to gain competence over the Welsh language. My concern is that the approach that seems to have been taken could have wider repercussions. In the course of this debate over the past few months, nobody has produced any substantial evidence or proof that the existing arrangements were not working or were unsatisfactory, or that there was any dissatisfaction with them. Indeed, I am not aware that there was any significant demand for legislation in this area at all.

However, the business grant that was previously given to help businesses to implement Welsh language schemes has quietly and quickly been phased out. Instead of supporting businesses with the costs of bilingual materials and signage, it seems that the Plaid Cymru-Labour coalition has decided to resort to compulsion, at the risk, perhaps, of forfeiting the good will that the language enjoys. Conservative Members are great supporters of the Welsh language, and it is undeniable that major progress on the language has come under Conservative Governments. However, the decision to go down the route of new legislation in the current economic climate carries risks of raising costs and fuel bills, and of deterring certain businesses from operating in Wales—unless, of course, the Minister can answer the questions that I have rightly raised on behalf of the people who have contacted us. Not only would that be extremely damaging economically, but it would risk doing harm to the language itself—nobody in this place wants that.

I want to see the language protected and nurtured, not resented or turned into a non-tariff barrier to business or to consumer choice. If this order goes through, measures will flow from it, and I hope that none of my fears are realised. At least I know that we have tried to identify those issues that may cause problems and to ask the questions that have been raised with us. We will be watching progress on this matter closely to ensure that, particularly in these difficult economic times, nothing is done to disadvantage Welsh businesses, Welsh consumers, Welsh families and, most importantly, the language itself.

10.24 pm

Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to take part in this debate tonight, albeit that it is late in the day. However, I think that it is right to say that in many quarters there will be a palpable sigh of relief that the order in its final form is now before us.

Some outside this place have condemned the presence of this business on the Order Paper today and in particular the last session of the Welsh Grand Committee as deliberate attempts at delay and prevarication. I do not believe that that is the case. I believe that what the

[Mark Williams]

Secretary of State said was true—he has just about succeeded, judging by the turn-out this evening—and that there was a conscious effort to ensure that there was the widest possible consultation on a matter that could be emotive and sensitive and that is very important. I hope that there will be approval by the end of the debate, too, although I hesitate to say that after the last speech.

Tonight's debate is not about the merits of the LCO process. It is about transferring powers to our Assembly, at its request, and using the LCO process to achieve it. I can think of no other area of policy where there is such a strong moral case. I am proud to be a member of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, and our Chairman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis), is always at great pains when we scrutinise all LCOs to ensure that we do not stray into the realms of Measures that the Assembly might introduce. The irony in this process was that some of the most strident supporters of this order were telling us on the one hand to keep our noses out, as we should, and to respect the integrity of the Assembly to introduce what Measures it wants, but on the other to include certain facets in the order. Under the chairmanship of the hon. Gentleman, we resisted.

Welsh is the first language of more than half the population in Ceredigion and its use is heard across Wales, as we will no doubt hear later on, including in the more anglicised parts. Linguistic Welsh language education policy based on choice is working, and it is working well. More than 40 per cent. of three to 15-year-olds have an understanding and practical use of the language in our schools, compared with about 20 per cent. of the over-45s. It is a success story that is moving forward. That growth among the young is, I believe, the greatest motivation for the order to proceed and for Measures to follow, so that the growing number of Welsh speakers can access services in the language of their choice. That principle is as valid for the children whom I used to teach in my primary school a few miles from the English border as it is for my children, who are learning and speaking Welsh in a category A school in Y Fro Gymraeg in our village in Ceredigion. It transcends the whole country.

The jigsaw needs to fit together and the Assembly rightly wishes to acquire the capacity to fill the holes left by the passage of time since the Welsh Language Act 1993 and to advance the cause of true bilingualism. Like the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), I commend the work of Lord Roberts of Conwy in 1993 and praise the constructive way that the Assembly Minister has approached the order as well as the work of one of his predecessors—one of my party colleagues, Mrs. Jenny Randerson—who did much to initiate and promote Iaith Pawb under her watch.

We have the system that we have, and of course some of us would welcome an even broader transfer of powers, but the order is none the less welcome. The scrutiny has been immensely worthwhile. It has brought us a much improved order, in particular because of the introduction of the concept of proportionality and reasonableness. I believe that many of the sceptics have been reassured. I welcome the increase in the threshold to £400,000. It gives a more reasonable basis on which we can move forward in the future. There was a question mark over whether there should be an arbitrary threshold, and whether it was the right way forward. This figure is certainly an improvement on that of £200,000. I welcome also the disapplication of those in receipt of one-off payments. That, too, made great sense.

Now in particular, at the end of the process and despite what we heard earlier, I want to welcome the response from the business community. I remember a very difficult meeting of the Federation of Small Businesses in my constituency, where I tried to justify the original order to a very sceptical audience, concerned at the perceived added costs during the recession. It was heartening that in the evidence that people from the FSB gave to our Committee, they said that they felt reassured by the assurances given to them by the Minister for Heritage in the Assembly, and it was especially heartening to see the response of the CBI. Its initial evidence to us showed that it was sceptical and concerned about the implications but, at the end of the process, it has said publicly that

"it is significant that this...proportionality and reasonableness"

element

"has now been written on to the face of the bill."

It is happy with the legislation and wants it to proceed, and I think that many of us wish to proceed on a positive note.

All parties—most parties, I should qualify that—have worked well to arrive at where we are now. The Chairman of our Select Committee ensured that we reached consensus. There was consensus in the Welsh Grand Committee, and I hope that there will be consensus tonight. Liberal Democrats are confident that the order will give the Assembly the tools that it needs to develop the next stage of Welsh language provision, and I am happy to offer the order my party's support, although I still look forward to the day when the Assembly exercises even greater autonomy, unfettered by this place.

10.30 pm

Dr. Hywel Francis (Aberavon) (Lab): I add my condolences on behalf of the Welsh Affairs Committee to Mr. Carwyn Jones following his bereavement today.

I am pleased to speak in support of the order, which is important for the people of Wales. I speak from the perspective of being Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, which produced a unanimous cross-party report supporting the principles underpinning the order. The Welsh Affairs Committee has an important role in carrying out pre-legislative scrutiny of proposed LCOs and ensuring that the final versions are fit for purpose. Both my Committee and the Assembly's scrutiny committee recommended changes to the original proposed order to establish reasonable, proportionate and cost-effective language legislation. I am pleased that our key recommendations have been reflected in the draft order presented by the Secretary of State for approval today. I thank him for his kind words of support for the work of the Welsh Affairs Committee, with which, of course, I agree.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I compliment the hon. Gentleman and his Committee on their work. Given the circumstances in which we find ourselves, introducing reasonableness and proportionality into the LCO was probably a good thing, but it is strange that that has to be in the order and that we cannot trust the Assembly to be reasonable and proportionate when it brings forward Measures.

Dr. Francis: It is not strange at all; it is perfectly straightforward. As it happens, that was the way in which we achieved unanimity in the Committee.

It is also a significant achievement that an order that was originally perceived as controversial has, in its revised form, secured cross-party support. I feel that that was achieved as a consequence of listening carefully to all sectors of Welsh society. The support was unanimous, which no one could have predicted.

The Committee made the important point that while language legislation is a fundamental part of ensuring that the Welsh language continues to thrive, it is far from the whole picture. That was demonstrated by the evidence that we took during our inquiry including, crucially, from the Catalan Government, who have a long experience of language law. The Catalan witnesses clearly felt that legal sanctions were secondary to the development of a positive culture of acceptance of and support for the language—we are now at that point in Wales. Compulsion and enforcement need to be secondary to a continuation of a consensual progress and should be used only as a last resort. Clarity of expectation, as reflected in legislation, should be the primary route for further progress, and I believe that the order fulfils that aim well.

Hon. Members representing all the major parties and rural, urban and valley constituencies listened and responded to the concerns, aspirations and, most of all, the united pride in our language expressed by Welsh speakers and non-Welsh speakers. That was the key to our success, and the success of the LCO is that it has not proved to be divisive but has unified Wales and the Welsh people in its support.

Only today, I received an e-mail from the senior public affairs executive of E.ON UK plc, in which she said:

"We welcome the changes to the LCO following debate in both Westminster and Cardiff. We believe that removing energy generators from the scope of the LCO was appropriate, given that generators provide no direct service to customers. We also welcome the introduction of the 'reasonableness and proportionality' clause."

Against that background of unity, I would simply say to the House tonight, "Rhowch eich cefnogaeth i'r Iaith Gymraeg heno."

I urge the House therefore, as Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, to give this legislative competence order its full support tonight. As the Abercraf miners' banner proclaims, in the colours of the African National Congress,

"mewn undeb mae nerth a heddwch"—

in unity there is strength and peace.

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is worth reminding hon. and right hon. Members that I have imposed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

10.35 pm

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC): Perhaps I should begin with a few points about the remarks of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who speaks for the Conservatives. She seems to be entirely obsessed with compulsion, without recognising that compulsion is a central feature of the Welsh Language Act 1993, which was passed by this place after the great work carried out by Lord Roberts.

There is compulsion in Wales, where Welsh speakers are compelled each day to speak English or do without. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, even in this place, the very cockpit of British democracy, I am compelled to speak English or you would rightly show me the door. There is compulsion in all these matters: compulsion is nothing new in respect of language use in Wales, where people are compelled to use English.

My second point is for the benefit of those struggling to record my words earlier. After 49 years of struggling with English, my English deserted me at the crucial moment. The point that I wanted to make to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham was that she was praising the voluntary approach while at the same time pointing out that it did not seem to work. She quoted the figures, and the words that I was struggling to find were, "How does she reconcile those two contrary standpoints?" However, we got her answer anyway, such as it was.

I am glad to see the LCO reach this final stage. Emancipation for the Welsh language has been the focus of my work, political and otherwise, for at least the last 38 years. In that time, I have been inspired in many ways, for example by the people from all over the world who have moved to Wales and learned Welsh. I have also been inspired by the first words of children as they learned the language, and by my own grandson, Osian Rhys, speaking his first words in Welsh. I was seven when I learned English, so perhaps when he gets to that age he will also speak English—although that may happen a bit earlier these days.

We also have a vigorous culture through the medium of Welsh. That includes our literature and music, but also the recently published four-volume dictionary of Welsh published by the university of Wales. That is a towering and incredible intellectual feat for what is a fairly small language group. We have all kinds that we could be very proud of, but problems have always arisen throughout my concern for the Welsh language over all these years. Despite the vigour of the Welsh language, and of the campaign in its favour, there have always been problems and inequality. That is why, when talking about the Welsh language, I use the word "emancipation" advisedly.

The LCO is a progressive and radical step towards ensuring that it will eventually become possible for people to live their lives through the medium of Welsh, able to take for granted all the things that speakers of English take for granted. We will do so without continually having to ask, to press, to argue and eventually to organise and to protest, as I have done to demonstrate my concern for the language. Hopefully, one will be able to live one's life normally through the medium of the Welsh language.

The LCO is a step towards winning equal rights for Welsh speakers. It does not go the whole way; there is further work to be done. I draw the attention of the House to two of my ten-minute Bills, one on bilingual juries and one on the registration of births and deaths in Welsh, both of which can be passed only in this place. If the order is passed, much of the work in future will be undertaken in Wales. That is how it should be.

It is striking that during the long, long passage of the order, no one, as far as I know, has argued that responsibility for the Welsh language should not be passed to the

[Hywel Williams]

Welsh Assembly. There have been intense discussions about the nature of the powers that are to be passed and the conditions attached, but the central fact tonight is that if the order is passed through the House, responsibility for the Welsh language will be passed to the Assembly. That is a striking and radical step. We should be rightly proud of having taken it. Twelve years ago, when the Labour Government came in, that would have been seen by many people as an impossibility. I am glad to acknowledge that we have come this far.

Circumstances have changed substantially, of course, over those years and certainly since the Welsh Language Act 1993. The implementation of any social legislation should be reviewed and remade every now and then. Perhaps 15 years is a proper period to revisit it. In that time, many changes have taken place, most strikingly in Wales in the demography of the language. When I first became interested in the issue, one could reasonably expect to find Welsh speakers among the older group of the population. Now it is clear that Welsh speakers are preponderantly young people. The Welsh language is getting younger and growing. That is a striking fact, and the law needs to respond to that.

Education has changed substantially. Under the Education Reform Act 1988, Welsh became a compulsory subject. That brought about profound changes. There have been changes in broadcasting and in the daily use of the language. A significant point in our discussion about whether telecommunications should be included is that there has been a great change in the use of technology, particularly by young people.

We were all struck by the fact that the average age at which young people acquire a mobile telephone is eight. At the age of eight, they are using those little devices, which at present usually speak English. However, when our Catalan friends came over to give evidence, they pointed out that if one presses a certain button on a mobile phone, it speaks Catalan. There is no technical problem to prevent it providing a service through the medium of Catalan, and there should be no problem in providing a service through the medium of Welsh. The European context has changed a great deal, and Catalan, Basque and other European so-called minority or lesser used languages are more prominently used, and Welsh has been used in Brussels.

In closing, I pay tribute to people who have contributed to the generation, discussion and development of the LCO. It has been a long process. It would be remiss of me not to pay a generous tribute to my colleagues at the Assembly, Rhodri Glyn Thomas and Alun Ffred Jones, for their vision and their perseverance. At this late hour, it would be remiss of me not to congratulate the Secretary of State and his deputy, who have worked hard, as well as the members of the Welsh Affairs Committee and of the Committee in the Assembly.

I am sorry that the shadow Secretary of State took the rather negative tone that she took earlier. Her colleague, the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Jones), has contributed positively to the discussions, although we took different sides on some questions. We did not agree on everything, but it was disappointing that the hon. Lady adopted such a negative tone in her remarks.

We have reached a conclusion. In part it represents a compromise on all sides, but it is also a highly significant staging post. I hope that the LCO can now progress and the Welsh Assembly can proceed with the real work, as far as the Welsh language is concerned, of passing and implementing Measures.

10.45 pm

Mr. Paul Murphy (Torfaen) (Lab): I share the view that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and other Members have expressed about the significance of this debate, and may I tell the shadow Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis) how much I share their sentiments with regard to the death of Carwyn Jones's mother? Significantly, this is the first such debate on the Floor of the House since the changeover in Cardiff, and I pay tribute to Rhodri Morgan for all the work that he has done for Wales and, particularly, for the Welsh language during his tenure in office.

For 17 months, when I held the position of Secretary of State for Wales for a second time, much of my time was spent looking at this particular legislative competence order and discussing with Rhodri Morgan how it should eventually emerge for our consideration. When Sir Emyr Jones Parry's report came out the other week, I thought it a bit churlish when it referred to the LCO process as being too complicated, too intricate and not to be understood. I reject that. The process of creating this LCO has been exemplary, and the Welsh Affairs Committee, under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, has done a remarkable job in changing how the order has developed and how it will be accepted throughout Wales.

I, myself, decided to ensure that there was a proper consultation process, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State kindly remarked, and that process was very wide-ranging indeed. Representatives of industry, trade unions, the academic world, local government, public bodies and anyone who wanted to comment on this very important measure were allowed to do so, and they did. As a consequence of that consultation and our scrutiny here, including in the Welsh Grand Committee, in the other place and finally in the House tonight, the Measures that the Assembly eventually passes will be better. That is absolutely the case.

I welcome the order for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most important one is how the world has changed, since I was a lad, in terms of those of us who represent areas that are not Welsh-speaking—areas encompassing 80 per cent. of the population of Wales. Those of us who are Welsh men and women and proud of it, but who cannot speak the Welsh language, now accept the language as part of our life in the same way that those who speak the language have for many generations. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) has often said, that is largely due to education. In our schools throughout Wales, from Monmouthshire, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, to Meirionnydd and beyond, we see people who are able to speak and learn the language in a way that we could never do in the past. That is important, and this LCO will give the Assembly the authority and the competence to extend the use of Welsh language throughout our nation.

We must look at one or two caveats, however. We must recognise that different parts of Wales need to be treated differently. If we look at people living in my constituency, a south Wales mining valley, in rural Wales or in the cities, we find that there is a case for considering how the Welsh language is dealt with. Provision is universal in education, for example, but we must tread carefully with regard to business. We are still in a recession, and it is good that the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and businesses generally support this LCO. They believe that the Welsh language is very much a part of our heritage, but they also warn that the measure should be implemented with sensitivity and reasonableness.

A soft touch is required in terms of how the measure is implemented throughout the whole of Wales. The hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) made reference to compulsion. Of course this LCO would allow the Assembly to introduce compulsory legislation for people in Wales, but it is better to have consensus than compulsion because that is more acceptable. Compulsion may be there as a last resort, but it should not be the first method by which we deal with this issue. If those whose job it is to enforce the legislation, whether it be the new commissioner, the Welsh Language Board or the Assembly itself, are heavy-handed, then the measure will have exactly the opposite effect to what we in this Chamber have been arguing for over the past year in saying that this is an important piece of legislation. I do not believe that that will happen, but that people will be sensible about this.

Nearly two centuries ago, when my great-grandparents came from Ireland and the west of England to the eastern valley of Monmouthshire, 60 or 70 per cent. of the population were indigenous Welsh speakers. We can tell that from looking at the Welsh chapels that are still in my valley and the history of the place. I recently read a biography of Thomas Thomas of Pontypool, a great Baptist leader who was Welsh speaking, and who said that with the great influx of English speakers coming into the valleys of Wales, it was necessary to temper the approach with moderation. I believe that in the past 20 years, particularly in the past 10 years since the Assembly has been operating, we have adopted the right approach. Because of the sensitive way in which these matters have been approached, in my constituency and the valley of Torfaen, which is one of the most English-speaking constituencies in the whole of Wales, we now have a Welsh-medium comprehensive school and Welsh-medium primary schools. Welsh is taught in every school, and the language is no longer a divisive issue.

When this LCO goes to the Assembly in Cardiff for it to pass the necessary Measures, as it rightly should, rather than this place, I hope that the Members of the Assembly will realise—I am sure they will, as do Members of this House—that the process over the past year has been one of great co-operation between legislators in Cardiff and in London: all of us representing the Welsh people, all of us with the interests of the Welsh language at heart.

I wish the measure well. Like my right hon. Friend and hon. Friends, I believe that it is a milestone, not only in the history of the way in which we deal with Welsh matters in the House of Commons but in the history of the Welsh language.

10.53 pm

Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I join the Secretary of State in offering condolences to the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, on the loss of his mother.

Tonight's debate, as several colleagues have remarked, is the culmination of a process that has shown the best of parliamentary scrutiny and shown that Welsh MPs have an invaluable contribution to make in strengthening devolution and in supporting the Welsh language. I very much echo the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy). As a member of the Welsh Affairs Committee, it was a privilege to be involved in that scrutiny. Before we started, there was a prediction that there would be division. There were fears that it would all end in tears: on the one hand, there would be too light a touch; on the other, too onerous a burden would be imposed on business.

That process of scrutiny reflected the way that things have changed over several years. The language has been a matter of division and controversy in the past, but, as my right hon. Friend said, it is now valued by the vast majority of those who do not themselves speak Welsh. That includes many who have chosen to move to Wales from England or Scotland, or other parts of the world, as well as those of us who speak the language. I believe that that is largely because our model has been one of choice rather than compulsion. Education through the Welsh language was unusual as recently as when I and my wife were choosing it for our children. It is now chosen by increasing numbers every year. Let us not forget that a great deal of the progress that was made was due to decisions of Labour local authorities in places such as Glamorgan, Clwyd and Gwent. Those decisions were often taken by councils with very little representation, if any, of Welsh speakers.

In the Assembly, the language has never been an issue. Why? Because it has been possible for people to use Welsh or English as they choose and be answered in Welsh or English, and for translation to be available to all. When the LCO came forward, there were doubts from organisations such as the CBI, which were worried that the powers might be used to put onerous burdens on companies. I spent some time with the CBI and its members debating these issues, and I found that some of the concerns were genuine but some arose from considerable misunderstandings about the intentions behind the LCO. I pay tribute to David Rosser and members of the CBI for being willing to spend time exploring the issues and expressing their concerns.

Those concerns are answered by two things. The first is the provisions requiring reasonableness and proportionality. Essentially, what the Assembly has to ask itself in deciding whether to approve any Measure is whether it will help citizens to choose to use the Welsh language rather than just increase burdens or bureaucracy.

The second thing that answers the concerns is crucial, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen referred to it. It is the advice from the Catalan Government. When we asked whether legislation was necessary, their answer was essentially, "Yes, it requires a framework of law, but all your action thereafter should be directed to building consensus and seeking agreement to enable people to be positive about the developments that you want to promote." I hope

[Alun Michael]

that there will be the wisdom on the part of Assembly Ministers and the Assembly itself to make that the test all the time. They must ask themselves, "Have we done enough to build consensus? Will this actually help citizens to make positive choices about the use of the Welsh language?" The Assembly should use Measures when they are necessary to support consensus, not as an alternative to the hard work of building consensus.

There are three lessons that we need to learn in future from this process on the Welsh language LCO. The first is on policy development. It is important that there should be full debate, and that the intentions behind any proposal should be thought through properly. Clear policy is necessary for creating good law. The second is on drafting. Intelligent and sophisticated drafting is not easy, and it is very easy to have loose phraseology and create unintended consequences. I fear that the drafting in LCOs has sometimes been too general, or certainly the first draft. It seems to have followed the Whitehall pattern, if you like—officials seeking to draft something because there may not be another opportunity for primary legislation for a number of years. Vague and loose language is therefore used to give the widest possible powers. That is not a good way of drafting legislation, especially because the LCO process makes it possible for the Assembly to come back for a further order if it wants to do something more, without any great delay.

The third lesson to learn concerns scrutiny. The Committee of the Assembly did a good job and asked the right questions, and we on the Welsh Affairs Committee quoted extensively from its findings and evidence in reaching our own conclusions. However, it did not provide answers, which the Welsh Affairs Committee did. As others have, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon for building consensus in his capacity as its Chairman. It is an example that we should all follow. I pay tribute also to the members of all four parties who worked hard on getting the matter right and put a great deal of time and effort into the discussions and examining the evidence; to the Assembly for accepting our suggestions; and especially to the new First Minister, then the Counsel-General, for his willingness to engage with MPs. Finally, I thank the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary for their willingness to take our recommendations and use them. I say that because it is very easy to say, "No. We have drafted it this way. It is not invented here. We will go the way we intend." The willingness to listen to the wisdom of the Members of four parties on the Welsh Affairs Committee is good for Wales and we should celebrate it.

The best model for devolution is shown by the way the order has been dealt with. At the end of the day, it shows a willingness to trust the Assembly, but also to encourage it to be joined up and to be intelligent in its use of the power being transferred. The process has also made use of the knowledge and experience of Welsh Members of Parliament of the four parties that are represented here. That must be a good model for the future.

11 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I do not intend to detain the House for long on this subject. I feel something of an interloper in these affairs, but as various right hon. and hon. Members will know, including a number of former Ministers on the Government Benches, I have ventured forth on Welsh affairs on a number of occasions, imperfectly but enthusiastically. As a Member of this Parliament, I of course take an interest in the whole of the Kingdom.

The background to this debate is the Welsh Language Act 1967 and the Welsh Language Act 1993. It is instrumental to consider those for a moment in the context of the order. The order transfers competence, but it seems to me, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), the shadow Secretary of State, pointed out, and as the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) made clear in a typically splendid contribution, important that we do so in a collaborative fashion and with what the latter described as a light touch.

To that end, I want to draw the attention of right hon. and hon. Members to the debate on the 1993 Act, which began, as they will remember, in the House of Lords. There are two aspects of that debate that I think are pertinent to tonight's considerations. The first was the comment made by the Minister who introduced the Bill. He said:

"The Bill provides for the implementation of this principle"

that, by the way, is the principle that the Welsh and English languages should be treated on a basis of equality—

"in ways which are appropriate in the circumstances and reasonably practicable". [*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 January 1993; Vol. 541, c. 836.]

That abiding principle of reasonableness seems essential to our considerations of the possibilities that might arise from the transfer of competence in the way the order plans. As I said, the right hon. Member for Torfaen made that point very clearly.

The three issues I would therefore like to raise are to some degree amplifications of the remarks made by the shadow Secretary of State. It is important that we consider both the disincentive effect on companies or bodies that might want to locate in Wales and the effect on organisations already situated there of any additional cost burden. I hope that that will be considered. That is certainly a reflection of some of the less favourable sentiments that have been expressed in Wales on the back of the publication of the order. As hon. Members on both sides of the House will know, reaction has been mixed. Part of that mixed reaction has been founded on concerns about the possible additional burdens on the organisations I mentioned.

The second question relates to the cost of implementation—the shadow Secretary of State raised the issue of appeals. It is inconceivable that there has been no modelling in Government of the likely costs of implementation. I appreciate that the absence of an impact assessment results in part from the very nature of the process that we are now enjoying, but none the less it would be interesting to hear what modelling has taken place. It is inconceivable that the Secretary of State has not taken a view on the likely cost that might arise from the measure.

The third issue relates to the test of reasonableness. What test of reasonableness might be applied? What constraint might be placed on where this order could end up? The possible destinations could be very different, as the right hon. Member for Torfaen implied in his

speech. We need to apply a test of reasonableness to this provision, and I hope that we might hear more about that from the Minister when he sums up.

As I said, I periodically and with some trepidation intervene on Welsh affairs in the knowledge that many other hon. Members know far more about them than I do, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I may say so. None the less, it is important that hon. Members who represent constituencies far from Wales show an appropriate level of concern about the affairs of this House and of the Assembly, and the relationship between the two.

11.5 pm

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): May I echo the sentiments expressed by colleagues across the House in sending our sympathy to the First Minister on his loss? Our thoughts and prayers will be with him and his family. May I also echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) in paying tribute to the retiring First Minister, who has been an exceptional First Minister for the whole of Wales for the last 10 years?

I welcome this debate and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on bringing this matter to the Floor of the House of Commons. It is right that this legislative competence order should come here, because tonight we are changing the constitution, and that should be a matter for the whole House of Commons. Indeed, this matter is listed on the Order Paper as constitutional law.

We are changing the constitution because the Government of Wales Act 2006 specifically allows us to do so by use of LCOs. I hope that in future all Welsh LCOs brought forward under this Act will come to the House in this way. Nobody here or in Wales should have any concerns about this form of scrutiny. We are, after all, changing the constitutional relationship between this sovereign Parliament and the devolved Welsh Assembly.

If we pass this LCO tonight, as I believe we will, we will pass to the Assembly the competence to make primary legislation on matters relating to the Welsh language. I approve of that, because the National Assembly for Wales is the right place to make such legislation. By bringing this matter to the Floor of the House the Government are avoiding the charge of devolution by stealth—a charge that I have laid at their door many times in the past when these LCOs have been taken upstairs in Committee, not down here. I take the view, as I did as deputy to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, that changes to the devolution settlement that affect the constitution should be debated in this House and, if necessary, voted on by this House. I hope that in future all LCOs relating to Wales will be brought here in this way.

This LCO, concerning legislative powers over the Welsh language, has the potential to divide Wales. I am not entirely convinced by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis) that this has united Wales, because—if we are honest—debates on the Welsh language have tended to divide opinion in Wales in the past, not unite it. That may be sad, but that is how it is. In the case of this LCO, there has been wide concern that the measures that will follow giving the Assembly the right to make secondary legislation will in some way discriminate against the 80 per cent. of our people who are not bilingual. Many of those concerns have been assuaged by the extensive consultation on this LCO that was launched by my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen when he was Secretary of State. The work of the Welsh Affairs Committee and the Committee of the National Assembly in taking evidence has helped to reframe this LCO so that it has been more warmly welcomed across Wales. I think that this consultation is the right way to go.

I cannot see why any Assembly Minister or Member should fear open and transparent consideration of a matter that will affect every man, woman, child, business and industry in Wales. When I first heard about this LCO, I was concerned that the measure would have some adverse effect on business, industry and non-bilingual people in Wales. The Assembly has the right to make secondary legislation—in other words, to put meat on the bones of the order—when the power is passed to it. I consulted widely in my constituency and beyond, and talked to businesses, trade organisations, training providers and charities, all of which were seeking to express their concerns and worries about the use of the LCO.

I discussed the matter with colleagues and Ministers, including in the Assembly, and I know that many others did the same. We were not helped at the outset by what I must describe as a paranoid approach by some in the Assembly who seemed to go out of their way to refuse to give any indication of what might happen when they receive the power from Parliament and of how it might be operated. That was wholly unhelpful to the kind of discussions that we had in the beginning, and there is no doubt that the work of the Welsh Affairs Committee, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, made a big difference there. Great credit must be given to it.

I recall that, when I was a Wales Office Minister, when matters affecting Welsh legislation came before Parliament, I often exchanged letters with the relevant Assembly Minister. That exchange would then be made public without in any way interfering with the Assembly's right to make secondary legislation. Very often, those letters and that information enabled people in this place to better understand what would be done with the legislation when the relevant powers were passed to Cardiff. I commend that approach. I cannot think of anything better, but if anyone else can, I hope that they will pursue it, because that is the right way to pursue such matters. At the end of the day, however, we must leave the Assembly with the right to make secondary legislation.

The Assembly, as an institution, will demonstrate its maturity when all its Members—not just some of them—and some of its Ministers too, get a little less worked up about the kind of scrutiny in which we in this place, under our constitutional settlement, are rightly allowed to participate. It makes for better legislation, and I believe that we are proving that tonight.

11.12 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in this debate. I, too, wish to send my heartfelt sympathies to Carwyn Jones on the loss of his mother. At the end of an extraordinary

[Paul Flynn]

few weeks in the history of Wales, I also offer a tribute to the retiring First Minister, who has had an extraordinary 10 years. To stand down at the end of 10 years from the most important job in Wales and to be garlanded with such popularity—by 65 to 75 per cent. of the nation—is phenomenal. It does not happen very often. A member of my party who witnessed the tributes to this great giant of the nation was surprised to see that 10 minutes later he was queuing in the cafeteria for a cup of tea with Rhodri Morgan standing next to him. It does not happen that way in Westminster—it seems to be the Welsh way—but it might explain why Rhodri was so important.

At the moment, we have rare, if not unique, unity in Wales on so many issues. We have had a year of a stable and strong coalition Government, who have not been quarrelling constantly. That has been beneficial to Wales. We have seen in the debate tonight this extraordinary unity. We all know that in the past there have been divisions between us. I served with great pride on Gwent county council with my right hon. Friends the Members for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) and for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), although we were not unanimous then.

I would like to pay tribute to the Welsh language and what it has meant to my life. It has enriched it extraordinarily. I remember living with my family and having to be told that I lived in Wales. My mother explained to me that, although everyone to whom we spoke had Irish accents, we were in fact Welsh because we were born in Wales. We were just Welsh—not proper Welsh, like the people in north Wales, or real Welsh, like the people who speak with Welsh accents, but we were certainly Welsh.

I had the great luck that few had at the time of having an inspiring Welsh teacher who taught me the glorious, majestic poetry of Robert Williams Parry and T. Gwynn Jones. I remember that to this day. All my life, the language has been a source of great pleasure, right up to today, when I drive up the motorway to the sounds of Heather Jones singing "Mae Hiraeth yn fy Nghalon". There are many other great facets to modern Welsh, a language that in 1962 we all feared would not last until the end of the century, after the famous speech by Saunders Lewis, "Tynged yr Iaith". He said that the language was in such a steep decline that it could not survive to the year 2000. Welsh is now flourishing in a way that none of us believed possible.

I was involved in union work, but I came into politics because of the decision by the school teaching my eight-year-old daughter that the first Welsh song that she would ever learn would be the Welsh national anthem, but taught in English, which seems an affront too far. I got involved with the movement for Welsh-language schools in Gwent, which have survived and prospered magnificently. Every one of them has been a huge success. What a joy it is now to go into every school in my constituency, where, when I was young, people would have been uncertain whether they were in England or Wales. The county's motto was "Faithful to both", which meant faithful towards England and Wales. Now it means faithful to both north Wales and south Wales, which is an entirely different meaning altogether.

It is a matter of some rejoicing for us as a nation that we have reached this point, where we have this treasure of the language, which has come to us down the centuries. It is a language that existed with sophisticated literature long before the English language existed, and it continues to prosper. Last week we had a saturnalia in Caerleon in my constituency—we go back a bit further than the Christian tradition—to celebrate the Roman Christmas. It is fascinating to recall that if one was attending a saturnalia in Caerleon 2,000 years ago, the children would have been speaking two languages: Welsh and Latin. Welsh is the language that survives on the lips of the children today—we do not hear a lot of people speaking Latin these days. That is a matter of great pride for us as a nation.

This evening's debate is a historical turning point, in that we are going forward in harmony as a nation, united and at peace with ourselves, to build a much stronger Wales and see our own Parliament on the soil of our country—something that we have not had in any reasonable form for centuries—strong, stable and certain to have a great future as an independent Parliament.

11.17 pm

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): It is clear from the contributions of hon. Members from all parts of the House that there is an immense fund of good will towards the Welsh language, and so should there be. As my noble Friend Lord Roberts of Conwy observed in another place, the language is a highly valued part not only of Welsh heritage, but of British heritage, and it should be cherished as such. Indeed, the fondness of Welsh people toward their language was clearly expressed just now by the hon. Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn).

While mentioning my noble Friend Lord Roberts, I feel it appropriate again to pay tribute to the efforts that he, probably more than any other living individual, has made to help secure the status of Welsh as a vibrant modern language, spoken by increasing numbers of people—and particularly young people—in the Principality, as the hon. Members for Ceredigion (Mark Williams) and for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) said. It was Lord Roberts who piloted the Welsh Language Act 1993 through Parliament. He has steadfastly championed the cause of the language at every available opportunity. All of us in the House owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.

The wisdom that Lord Roberts showed in 1993 is just as relevant today. If people are to be encouraged to use the Welsh language, it should be done, so far as possible, on a voluntary basis. This is, as the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) pointed out, a highly sensitive issue. We cannot take a broad-brush approach. We have to take account of different sensitivities and the different traditions of various parts of Wales.

I agree with the right hon. and hon. Members who have said that compulsion should be avoided at all costs. However, our concern is that the order envisages an element of compulsion. The hon. Member for Caernarfon not only recognised that but—I am sad to say this, because he is a nice man—appeared to rejoice in it. I have to warn the House that nothing is more likely to breed resentment than compulsion in Welsh language legislation. That is one step away from the politicisation of the language, and I am sure that almost everyone in this Chamber would wish to avoid that.

The order in its current form is, however, a significant improvement on the original draft, most particularly in its introduction of a reasonableness and proportionality

test. This is to the credit of the work of the Select Committee, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis). It was not an easy task to achieve consensus, but achieve it we did, and the draft LCO is all the better for that.

I also take heart from the memorandum supplied by the Welsh Assembly Government, which states:

"It is the Welsh Assembly Government's policy that subsequent Measures should not impose duties on organisations unless there is a clear public benefit in doing so. It is not the intention to place disproportionate obligations on any organisation."

I, for one, am willing to take them at their word, and I hope that they will be as good as their word.

However, we are concerned that Measures might be introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government that set up an unwieldy bureaucracy to oversee the language and to establish appeals and enforcement procedures, all of which will cost money at a difficult economic time, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) pointed out. More importantly, such Measures might militate against the unselfconscious use of both Welsh and English that we all want to see.

We still have reservations about the order, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to them. We do not know where the seemingly arbitrary figure of £400,000 has come from. We are concerned that professional supervisory bodies, many of whom may have limited resources or few members in Wales, could be subject to a requirement to produce a Welsh language scheme. We are utterly mystified as to why the Bank of England is included in the ambit of the order. I hope that the Minister can offer an explanation for that point, if for no other. We are concerned that royal chartered bodies are still arbitrarily included, although the number of categories of such bodies has, thankfully, been reduced. We are particularly troubled that post office services are still included, as that could act as a deterrent to prospective purchasers of sub-post offices in Wales. We are also concerned that niche market telecommunications, gas, electricity and water suppliers could be deterred from entering the Welsh market, which could have adverse consequences for Welsh consumers.

In summary, we are worried that, unless the powers conferred by this LCO are used judiciously and sensitively by the Welsh Assembly Government, they will have the potential to undo all the good that has been done by the Welsh Language Act 1993. They could create non-tariff barriers to companies wishing to establish themselves in Wales, and disadvantage Walsh consumers. They could be perceived as heavy-handed and bureaucratic. If the powers are not judiciously applied, they might be resented.

We must rely on the good will and good sense of the Welsh Assembly Government in this regard. We will not oppose the making of this order, but we will be looking very carefully at what the Assembly Government do with the powers conferred upon them. We urge them to proceed cautiously and sensitively. Indeed, in the medium term, they could do a lot worse than leave the current arrangements undisturbed.

11.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Wayne David): I shall begin by expressing my condolences to the First Minister on his sad bereavement today, as other hon. Members have done.

We have had a good debate tonight on the Welsh language and on this Welsh language competence order. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), who as Secretary of State for Wales began the process of consultation that has taken us in a very constructive way to where we are today. I believe that the consultation he began has led to the creation of a genuine consensus on the best way forward for promoting and enhancing the Welsh language. That consensus extends, I believe, not only to both Houses of Parliament, but to the Welsh Assembly and the people of Wales. One of the lessons of recent history is that if we are actively and positively to promote the Welsh language we must have a consensual approach, so that all the people of Wales are taken with us. The Welsh language is the language of all the people of Wales—English speakers as well as Welsh speakers.

In common with other Members, I pay tribute to the Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Dr. Francis), and to the excellent work that the Committee has done. The stipulations of reasonableness and proportionality are extremely important in respect of this LCO. I believe that the inclusion of those two tests makes this LCO that much the stronger.

A number of Members have greatly praised the process as it has been conducted and have warmly supported the provisions in the LCO. A number of reservations have, however, been expressed—rather too strongly for my liking. It is rather unfortunate that the reservations were expressed in the way they were, but some legitimate questions have been raised. Let me briefly refer to some of them.

The future of the Welsh Language Board was raised, and I believe that is very much a question for the Welsh Assembly Government. It will be for them to decide on its future, as they are empowered to decide.

A number of Members, particularly the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), raised the issue of the potential burden on business, which was echoed by the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes). One of the most important facets of this process has been the very positive engagement with the business community. Understandably, concerns have been expressed, but many of them have been sufficiently addressed and allayed. It is very significant that the CBI, for example, has warmly welcomed the introduction of reasonableness and proportionality in the LCO. That is important in itself, but it is also indicative of wider support and an acceptance that what we have before us is the best way forward for the Welsh language.

That does not imply, of course, that a voluntary approach towards enhancing the Welsh language is to be put to one side—quite the opposite. This legislative framework before us will provide a powerful stimulus to an increasing voluntary acceptance of the Welsh language in Wales. My right hon. Friends the Members for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) and for Torfaen made the valid point that the education system in Wales is in many ways still the key to promoting the Welsh language, ensuring that it is a language for young people and in tune with the needs of modern Wales.

Issues were raised about the appeals process, which is again very much in the hands of the Welsh Assembly Government, whose responsibility it will be, of course,

[Mr. Wayne David]

to fund any appeals mechanism that requires funding. I also stress that a regulatory impact assessment will be made of any Measures introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government as a consequence of this LCO. That is firmly embedded in the order, and it was fully recognised as well as warmly welcomed in the debates and the constructive discussions that we had with the Welsh Assembly Government.

Let me refer briefly to two other points. First, there is a stipulation threshold of £400,000, so that certain large organisations such as the National Botanic Garden of Wales are brought within the ambit of the LCO. The Bank of England is mentioned specifically because of the reference in the 1993 Act to the need for a Welsh language scheme involving it. Lord Roberts of Conwy—Wyn Roberts—is to be congratulated on having the foresight to introduce that stipulation in the Act.

May I conclude by saying—

11.30 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, THE DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).*

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft National Assembly for Wales (Legislative Competence) (Welsh Language) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 10 November, in the previous Session of Parliament, be approved.

Business without Debate

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order 118(6) and Order, 7 December),

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Anthony Hugh Burton Hobman as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 19 January 2010 for the period ending on 31 December 2013. —*(Mark Tami.)*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Resolved,

That, in respect of the Video Recordings Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time. —*(Mark Tami.)*

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May. —*(Mark Tami.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITIONS

Badman Report (Somerton and Frome)

11.30 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I wish to present a petition whose terms are probably fairly well known to the House by now, as they have been read out a number of times. It concerns the Badman report. I am indebted to my constituent Kate Charlesworth and several of her colleagues who came to see me some weeks ago to discuss the concern that they felt, as home educators, about what was proposed, and exchanged information with me. They collected the signatures on the petition from people in my constituency. There are also a few signatures from people in the neighbouring Wansdyke constituency.

The petition reads as follows:

The Petition of persons resident in the Somerton and Frome parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000526]

Badman Report (North Southwark and Bermondsey)

11.33 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I, too, wish to present a petition on the subject of the Badman report and home education. It was organised by the Stockman family, who live in Rotherhithe, and has been signed by 46 constituents of mine and by people living elsewhere in south-east London or in east London. It follows the terms of the petition read out by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), and those read out by other Members previously. It asks the Government to respond positively to the strong case that the petitioners make for home education to be permitted in the way that they desire, as opposed to the way that the Government seem to intend to pursue.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the parliamentary constituency of North Southwark and Bermondsey,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that

the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000566]

Badman Report (Vale of York)

11.34 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): I wish to present a petition in similar terms, in the names of Mr. and Mrs. McCallum and others residing in the Vale of York. I am a great supporter of home education, and I pay tribute to the home educators. We are fortunate enough to have a particularly good local education authority in North Yorkshire, but I agree with the concerns raised by the petitioners—that the Badman review was rushed, that its conclusions did not pay regard to the evidence, and that it confers undue powers of inspection—and I hope that the Government will reconsider.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Vale of York parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000651]

Climate Change

11.35 pm

Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I rise to present a petition passed to me by Durham students union and the People & Planet society, on behalf of 600 students who are pressing the Government and the international community to come to a fair and strong agreement on tackling climate change at Copenhagen.

The petitioners

request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with other countries in the United Nations to ensure: that the needs of the world's poorest people are at the heart of a new global climate change deal; that rich countries cut their emissions first; that rich countries provide the money and technology needed for developing countries to adapt to changing climates; and that less developed countries also invest in their most vulnerable communities to help them adapt to climate change.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons concerned about climate change,

Declares that, from an historical point of view, the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen is one of the most significant gatherings ever; that the world has precious little time to reach an agreement which will secure the future habitability of the planet; that climate change hits poor people first and worst as they face increasingly unpredictable weather, hunger and disease; further declares that this is a massive injustice because the poorest people are the least responsible for causing climate change and have the least resources to cope; further declares that at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference the world community will try to agree a solution to the gravest threat it has ever faced, that of global warming; further declares that the petitioners are doing what they can to reduce their personal contribution to global warming, but know that the world needs a fair and strong international climate change agreement.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with other countries in the United Nations to ensure: that the needs of the world's poorest people are at the heart of a new global climate change deal; that rich countries cut their emissions first; that rich countries provide the money and technology needed for developing countries to adapt to changing climates; and that less developed countries also invest in their most vulnerable communities to help them adapt to climate change.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000639]

Malta Cross/Africa Star

11.36 pm

Mr. Joe Benton (Bootle) (Lab): I rise to present a petition with more than 1,000 signatures, on behalf of my constituents, Mr. Tom and Mrs. Margaret Beswarick, among others.

The petition states:

The Petition of the George Cross Island Association North West Branch and others,

Declares that a small Maltese Cross should be issued by the British Government to be worn with the Africa Star, for personnel involved with the defence of Malta, in recognition of the valiant efforts of our former servicemen and the people of Malta.

[Mr. Joe Benton]

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to issue a small Maltese Cross to be pinned to the Africa Star.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000638]

Badman Report (Colchester)

11.37 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I rise to present a petition in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Crannis and 46 other constituents of mine on the Badman report. I will not read out the entire petition, as that has been done many times before, but they are

concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials.

The petitioners therefore request that the

existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Colchester parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000645]

Health Care Centre (Burnage)

11.38 pm

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): I rise to submit a petition on behalf of more than 500 residents, including my constituent Jean Quinn of Avon road, who are opposed to the planned closure of Burnage walk-in centre. I fully support the petition and was disappointed that the Prime Minister and local Labour party have failed to support the campaign to save it.

The petition states:

The Petition of persons concerned at plans to suspend walk-in services at Burnage Healthcare Centre in Burnage, Manchester

Declares that NHS Manchester is currently considering plans to suspend walk-in services at Burnage Healthcare Centre in Burnage, Manchester; notes that this is a service that is much valued and well used by the local community; declares that the Petitioners are concerned that a decision to suspend walk-in services was made without public consultation

Further declares that the petitioners are concerned by the impact that the suspension of services would have on the local community, particularly the elderly; that the Petitioners believe that a decision to proceed with the suspension would be misguided; and that the Petitioners believe that such a decision would be purely for financial reasons rather than being based on healthcare imperatives

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to do all in its power to persuade NHS Manchester to abandon plans to suspend walk-in services at Burnage Healthcare Centre and allow staff at the centre to continue their valuable work free from the threat of suspension

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000649]

Badman Report (Ceredigion)

11.39 pm

Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I should like to present a petition of 70 residents from the Ceredigion constituency, which has been organised by the Clarke family of Drefach, on the Badman report. Given the lateness of the hour, I shall not refer to the report as that has been done many times.

Following is the full text of the petition.

[The Petition of persons resident in the Ceredigion parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000644]

Badman Report (Blaydon)

11.40 pm

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I, too, wish to present a petition on the Badman report, on behalf of Julie Taylor and others from the Blaydon constituency who wish to express the genuine concerns about the report. They specifically request the Secretary of State to withdraw or not bring forward the various measures set out in the report. I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition tonight.

Following is the full text of the petition.

[The Petition of persons resident in the Blaydon parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and

right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000643]

Badman Report (Scarborough and Whitby)

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I, too, rise to present a petition on the Badman report, which has been signed by 42 of my constituents in the same terms as were so ably read out by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath).

Following is the full text of the petition.

[The Petition of persons resident in Scarborough and Whitby parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000641]

Dr Ghassemlou

11.41 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Some 5,300 people signed this petition, many of whom come from the UK Kurdish community. The Kurds are a proud and wonderful people, who have suffered oppression and betrayal over many years. They seek justice and a right to remind us of the atrocities, lest they ever be repeated.

The petition states:

The Petition of member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in the UK and others,

Declares that twenty years after their deaths the case of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the General-Secretary of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, Abdullah Ghaderi-Azar and Fadhil Rassoul has never been resolved, notes that they travelled to Vienna, on July 13, 1989 to negotiate a peaceful solution and obtain political rights for the Kurdish nation, with the appointed Iranian representatives, but that all three were killed during the meeting

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage the EU to press the government of Austria to allow an independent judicial enquiry into these deaths and to secure a just and true resolution to this case

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000648]

London City Airport

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mark Tami.)*

11.41 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity, even at this late hour tonight, to highlight my concerns and those of my constituents about the impact of flight noise, and the increase in the number of flights, from London City airport. It is also a pleasure to debate again with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Gillingham (Paul Clark), on a transport-related matter and I look forward to hearing his response in due course.

In the past 10 years, the number of air transport movements at London City airport has doubled, from just under 21,000 aircraft departures in 1999 to some 42,000 departures in 2008. We are about to see a further significant shift in the use of the airport. The London borough of Newham has now granted the airport permission to increase the number of flight movements by 50 per cent. The flights permission would increase from 80,000 to 120,000 movements a year. London City airport forecasts that it will handle up to 3.9 million passengers by 2010, and there are long-term plans to accommodate up to 8 million passengers by 2030. That potentially significant change in the scale and nature of the operations at the airport has gone largely unnoticed by many people.

This is not simply about the number of landings and departures; it is also about the flight paths that the aircraft will take. Last year, NATS consulted on wide-ranging proposals for the busy airspace above the south-east of England known as terminal control north. The plans covered all London airports, with modifications to landing and departure routings and holding points. In the case of London City airport, one of the proposed changes was to alter the northerly departure routing. Instead of aircraft taking a sharp northerly turn almost immediately after take-off and, thus, over Woodford and Chingford, they were instead intended to take a flight path to the north-east over my constituency in Hornchurch.

In September 2008, I received a letter from the head of external communications at NATS stating that there would be a longer time period for consideration of the consultation, as further options were being considered, including in respect of London City departures over north London. It stated that

"work is ongoing and further design options and suggestions are being evaluated",

adding that

"we have not set a timetable for the next steps on the TCN proposal."

In response to a further inquiry from me about the nature of the revised options being considered for London City, I received a letter on 2 December 2008 stating that a number of options for the wider terminal control north area were being considered and that

"there may well be a requirement for further consultation on any proposals that are brought forward, should they be significantly different to those on which we have already consulted."

It was therefore with some shock and surprise that I discovered several months after the event that on 8 January this year NATS submitted a formal airspace change proposal to the Civil Aviation Authority to alter the London City airport standard instrument departure routes, including the change to route more aircraft over my constituency. Ian Hall, the director of operations for NATS, was quoted in the accompanying press release as saying:

"These changes to the turn were proposed in the TCN consultation and are necessary to formalise the departure procedures for all aircraft using London City and will be an added safety benefit. It is a change we can achieve quickly and the CAA is keen that we do so."

I was subsequently informed in a letter from NATS that the CAA required it to expedite an airspace change proposal and that is self-evident when one reads the CAA decision letter of 20 February 2009. The letter stated that the changes were deemed by the CAA to be necessary to accommodate an increase in category C aircraft using the airport rather than following the STOLport configuration—or short take-off and landing airport configuration—that had originally been envisaged. In his decision letter, the then director of airspace policy at the CAA, John Arscott, stated that:

"As part of the TC North development briefings, my head of Controlled Airspace advised NATS that a re-design of conventional LCY SIDs"—

that is, London City standard instrument departures—

"to meet CAT C design criteria was required at the earliest opportunity and it was subsequently agreed that these re-designed SIDs should be incorporated within the TC North development project."

He went on to say:

"Following on from the TC North consultation, with the ongoing NATS evaluation of the TC North consultation feedback and a potential lengthy delay to eventual implementation, I decided that the LCY SID changes to bring conventional procedures up to CAT C design criteria could not be delayed any further; therefore, NATS was requested to submit a change proposal to bring the SID designs up to CAA and ICAO CAT C design requirements at the earliest opportunity."

It is interesting to note that that was virtually the last decision Mr. Arscott took as his term of office came to an end a week later on 1 March 2009.

In essence the terminal control north consultation as far as London City was concerned was potentially meaningless—one could say that it was a sham. The CAA had predetermined that change was necessary. I find that unacceptable and believe that I—along with my constituents—was given a completely false impression when the TCN consultation was initiated. The changes were brought into effect in May and are already starting to have an impact.

Both easterly and westerly departures from London City airport to the north that previously took a sharp turn following take-off are now being directed over my constituency following a similar track to the initial route adopted for north-easterly and southerly departures from the airport. Based on the 2009 usage rates published in the original TCN consultation, that will in future result in a near 50 per cent. increase in the number of departing aircraft overhead in my constituency from London City airport.

Although the CAA might have requirements to bring London City operations into compliance with CAA and International Civil Aviation Organisation design criteria for category C departures, that does not mean that my constituents should be forced to bear the brunt of the noise and environmental impact. Aircraft will be

passing overhead at between 2,000 and 3,000 feet with a typical noise level of 57 to 72 dB and potentially up to 77 dB for BAE 146 or RJ aircraft. The CAA decision letter accepts that residents will experience additional aircraft noise. Having read that letter, I am left with the impression that the TCN proposals, so far as they affected London City, were a done deal, and that the consultation undertaken was effectively meaningless.

This comes on top of the Newham council decision to approve an increase in the number of flight movements at London City by 50 per cent.—from 80,000 movements to 120,000. The combined impact of the changes to the London City departure routings and the proposed increase in flights would, in essence, lead to a doubling of the number of departing aircraft over my Hornchurch constituency. That will have a noticeable and significant impact on environmental amenity for my constituents. The double-whammy effect was never communicated or consulted on; again, I find that utterly unacceptable.

It is not just me, however. Significant questions are now being raised by neighbouring boroughs about the nature of the consultation conducted by the London borough of Newham in relation to approving the increase in flight movements. The London borough of Redbridge passed an uncontested resolution in November condemning the failure to consult it on the expansion of London City airport, and opposing further expansion at the airport or changes to the flight paths or modes of operation at the airport that would result in an increase in aircraft noise suffered by local residents. If my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) was in the Chamber, he would want to refer to that resolution because he has taken a close interest in the issue. However, it is not just Redbridge. I understand that motions in similar terms have also been approved by the London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest.

London City airport is consulting on its draft strategic noise action plan. The draft plan will have to be submitted to the Secretary of State for Transport early next year for consideration before formal adoption under the European environmental noise directive. I urge the Secretary of State not to accept the plan unless the significant complaints and concerns that I have raised in the debate have been properly addressed, particularly the significant impact that residents in east and north-east London will suffer due to departing aircraft from London City as a consequence of the flight routing changes. There should be a consideration of changes to routings, when appropriate, and discussions with both the CAA and NATS, when necessary, so that my constituents are not forced to bear the brunt of what I consider to be a fundamentally flawed notification and consultation procedure on two fronts.

Will the Minister make urgent representations to both the CAA and NATS about the nature of their general approach to consultation? The case raises serious and significant issues, and if their approach is simply to go through the motions by carrying out consultation on a done deal, that is utterly acceptable.

I also urge the Minister to instruct NATS and the CAA to go back to the drawing board, reassess the departure routings from London City, and come back with revised proposals as part of the next round of consultation under the TCN proposals. It is worth making the point that London City was specifically stripped out of the TCN. All the other proposals are still subject to further consideration and public consultation. Regardless of what the CAA might say, it is odd that London City was stripped out in such a way when everyone was under the impression that the TCN proposals were still being considered and would be the subject of further consultation.

Given the circumstances of such a significant change and its combined effect with the general increase in flight movements, and the impact that that will have on areas such as Hornchurch, I believe that the regulators have a duty to look again at the damaging proposals that are being fast-tracked through. While there might be arguments for increasing London City's capacity, they need to be balanced against the impact of additional disruption due to noise. I object that my constituents will bear the brunt of the environmental downside without any clear upside, that they are told that they have a voice in a consultation when they are given only a partial picture of the true scale of changes and that, in any event, their views would apparently simply be regarded as irrelevant.

In Hornchurch, we are lucky to have the benefit of significant environmental amenities. We have a significant amount of green space, with a number of large parks and sites of significant scientific interest. Their enjoyment will be adversely affected by these changes.

I therefore urge the Minister to use his influence to ensure that those agencies with responsibility for the planning of our flight paths look again at the design of the northerly routings from London City airport. They should look again at the serious environmental impact of their decisions, and be held properly accountable for their actions to my constituents and the residents of other affected areas.

11.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Clark): At the outset, may I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) on securing this debate? I am delighted to face him again and to have a further discussion on transport issues.

Our commitment to sustaining economic growth and protecting the environment is at the very heart of the Department's aviation policy-making process. With specific regard to smaller airports such as London City airport, the Government's 2003 White Paper "The Future of Air Transport" noted that regional and local planning authorities

"should take account of the benefits that development at the smaller airports could provide, and consider policies which facilitate the delivery of growth"

and opportunities at these airports. However, I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will agree that hard decisions have to be taken to strike a balance between tackling the environmental challenges, enabling people to fly and allowing the industry to compete internationally. Tensions will always arise in such matters, of course, but it is about getting the balance right.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues regarding recent changes at London City airport and I am keen to deal with them. I shall begin with Newham council's decision to grant planning permission for London City airport to increase by some 50 per cent. the total number of air traffic transport movements from 80,000 to 120,000 per year, and the impact that that might have on local residents.

[Paul Clark]

The decision to grant that planning consent was entirely a matter for the London borough of Newham. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who knows the position of his own Front-Bench team when it comes to the decision-making process at local level, will agree with that. Expansion of the airport is consistent with the Government's view that there is considerable potential for airports like London City to grow, and the airport is well placed to serve a niche business market.

James Brokenshire: It is important for the Minister to understand the Newham council decision, as one concern was whether it consulted properly with all the surrounding councils and all the residents who might be affected by the application. Will he consider that in the context of guidance given to planning authorities with regard to sensitive and significant applications such as this one? People who would have been affected found out about it only very late in the day, with the result that their ability to comment and provide objections was very limited.

Paul Clark: I was just about to come to that issue. A judicial review launched by the campaign group "Fight the Flights" is currently looking into whether there was consultation with the neighbouring boroughs of Redbridge and Waltham Forest, and their residents. The hon. Gentleman will recognise that it would be wrong for me to comment further, other than to say that the guidance as to the routes that should be taken is clear. Obviously, however, the judicial review will make its own decisions, and we wait to see what happens.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of standard instrument departure—SID—routes from the airport, which were introduced in May this year. These changes were brought about in order to bring London City airport's departure profiles up to the international design standards required for the mix of aircraft types that currently operate to and from the airport. Our airport operations have very high safety records, which is due in part to the hard work of all those responsible for maintaining that safety record and following the right profiles.

When the airport was first opened, the departure routings were designed to accommodate short take-off and landing operations. At that time the aircraft being flown from the airport were predominantly turboprops, which operated within certain departure speed categories, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman recognises. Over time the aircraft operating from the airport have changed to more modern jets that require faster departure speeds. Accordingly, the Civil Aviation Authority instructed NATS, the air navigation service provider, to consider changes to the London City SIDs to reflect the International Civil Aviation Organisation's departure design standards for the aircraft types that are operating from the airport.

In practice, the revised SIDs have merely formalised the departure tracks that were already being flown by about 60 per cent. of the airport's traffic. These changes were undertaken independently of the planning decision of Newham council and implemented in accordance with the independent airspace change process. The approval of the Secretary of State was not required in order to implement the changes. Guidance on the airspace change process is readily available on the CAA's website, which I looked at earlier today.

It might be helpful if I explain briefly the procedure for making changes to airspace in the UK. Airspace planning and regulation is the responsibility of the independent regulator, the CAA. The process for making changes to airspace is governed by the CAA's airspace change process. A change sponsor, in this case NATS, is responsible for developing and consulting on a proposal for an airspace change, ensuring that it satisfies and/or enhances safety standards, improves capacity and mitigates, as far as is practical, any environmental impacts in line with the Department's environmental guidance to the CAA.

Informed by the consultation, the airspace change sponsor must submit its proposal to the CAA. It is the CAA that then assesses the formal proposal against the regulatory requirements, including environmental objectives, which are clearly a concern to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents, and either approves or rejects the proposal. If the CAA considers that a proposal could have a detrimental effect on the environment, it is required to advise the Secretary of State for Transport. It must refrain from making the airspace change without first securing his approval.

Therefore, airspace changes are made only where it is clear, after consultation, that an overall environmental benefit will accrue or where the airspace management considerations and the overriding need for safety allow no practical alternative.

James Brokenshire: I appreciate the Minister's generosity in giving way. As I understand it, he has said that the CAA makes the decision whether there is an environmental aspect that should be referred to the Secretary of State. The CAA appears to be the judge and the decision maker on that. Is there any route whereby the Secretary of State could call in for consideration a proposed change in routing? It seems strange that the CAA can, in effect, require NATS to implement a change and decide on the environmental aspects itself.

Paul Clark: As I have indicated, the Secretary of State vests that power in the independent regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, but it has to make those considerations in conjunction with the guidance—particularly on the environmental side—that is laid out in conjunction with the Government's policy.

I shall now turn specifically to the environmental impact of the recent changes to London City airport. I recognise that the levels of aircraft noise and air quality, and the visual impact on the hon. Gentleman's constituents, will of course be of concern. I understand that point, and that is why I said right at the beginning of my remarks that getting the balance right is a judgment that has to be made.

The CAA's guidance on the airspace change process includes substantive guidance on a range of environmental requirements, including noise, air quality, tranquillity and visual intrusion. With regard to noise issues at London City airport, the hon. Gentleman will recall from my answer to his recent parliamentary question that responsibility for monitoring noise levels of aircraft at the airport falls to the airport operator. There are no statutory governmental noise controls like those that apply to Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports. However, under the terms of local monitoring agreements with the London borough of Newham, London City is required to produce annual noise contours.

Given that the airport is in the city centre and in close proximity to residential areas, it imposes stringent noise control measures that are designed to mitigate its local environmental impact. Those measures incorporate strict restrictions on opening hours, including a ban on night flights. In addition, the airport produces annual contours, whereby the noise levels at the airport are monitored by a noise and track-keeping system. Further, London City airport's noise insulation scheme has the lowest trigger of any airport in the UK. In developing an insulation scheme to reflect the local circumstance, the airport, I am encouraged to note, is able to set criteria so that properties within the 57 dBA contour can be considered for insulation. The hon. Gentleman will know that that goes beyond the recommended level of 66 dBA in the air transport White Paper.

In terms of noise, there are future initiatives and two key developments. The first relates to the proposed expansion of the airport. The planning conditions imposed as part of Newham borough council's planning consent requires the airport to develop an improved noise monitoring and mitigation strategy. That is expected to include the replacement of the existing noise and track-keeping system and improvements to the noise insulation schemes.

The second initiative relates to the requirement for the airport to prepare a strategic noise action plan under the European environmental noise directive. Under the terms of that directive, the airport is required to develop a draft action plan in consultation with the local community. The airport is conducting a public consultation on its draft noise action plan, and, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out on his website, the closing date is 15 January. He encourages everyone to participate in it, and that is absolutely commendable.

The consultation process is a valuable opportunity for the airport to work closely with its neighbouring communities in developing control measures that will apply over the next five years. The neighbouring communities are clearly important. Once the airport has completed its consultation and considered the responses, it will be required to submit the final draft plan to the Government so that it can be considered for formal adoption under the directive.

The airport is very aware of its local impact and seeks to ensure that local people see the benefit of living near an airport. The growth of the airport has encouraged businesses, investors and developers to locate in east London, bringing new services and facilities to the area.

Let me turn finally to TC north. TC north is one of the most complex pieces of airspace in the world, with routes in and out of the major airports of Heathrow, Stansted, Luton and London City. I must stress that the TC north proposals are not associated with, and do not assume, future development at Heathrow, Stansted or any other airport. As the hon. Gentleman said, the London City airport SID proposals originally formed part of the TC north consultation on a package of measures designed to reduce delay, maintain safety and improve environmental performance. That consultation on TC north was the largest of its kind undertaken; the population in the region affected is just under 13 million.

NATS directly consulted over 3,000 primary stakeholders, including MPs, county, borough, district and parish councils, environmental organisations and chambers of commerce. Before the launch of the consultation, NATS arranged briefings for local MPs and national and regional media. In response to concerns that there was not enough time to consider the details of the proposals, NATS extended the consultation period by four weeks, giving a full 17-week consultation period. Following that, NATS decided to review the TC north design options further. However, any revised designs for the TC north region are unlikely to be ready for consultation before autumn next year.

The CAA considered that further consultation on the London City airport SID proposals was not needed—

12.11 am

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

House of Commons

Wednesday 16 December 2009

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Older People (Security)

1. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to increase the security of older people in Northern Ireland. [306250]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): I recently launched the "Safer Ageing" strategy for older people, which was developed in partnership with representatives from older people's groups, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and the Policing Board. The strategy sets out how Government and partners will work together to reduce the crime and antisocial behaviour experienced by older people in Northern Ireland.

David Taylor: While I welcome the new "Safer Ageing" strategy, is it not the case that the recent spate of burglaries and attacks on older people in Northern Ireland has had a devastating impact on the individuals affected, and will it not in turn have created a deeper fear of crime across the older population? What practical measures are there in the new plan to reduce that corrosive level of fear?

Paul Goggins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There has been considerable public concern in Northern Ireland about the spate of attacks on older people there, and the impact on individual older people is devastating. He is also right to say that not only does it have an impact on them as victims, but that it has a wider impact in terms of the fear of crime.

Two elements are very important here. The first is to have highly visible policing, which is certainly happening in the wake of the attacks. The second is the practical initiatives to which my hon. Friend referred, and I draw his attention to one in particular—the HandyVan scheme, which provides free locks, door chains, smoke alarms and other safety devices for older people. It helps them to feel safer, and it is an important initiative that my Department supports.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that there has been an increase in burglaries right across the Province of Northern Ireland. In my constituency, there have been at least 15 burglaries in three weeks in the town of Portadown, and in Lurgan and Banbridge. Does he agree that the reduction of 90 officers in Upper Bann and the closure of the Portadown police station are unacceptable at this time?

Paul Goggins: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about any crimes that take place in his constituency, or indeed anywhere. However, he has referred to the loss of 90 posts in H district, but these are not police officers who are being cut out of the police provision for his area. These are 90 police officers who have been identified by the Chief Constable as officers whom the hon. Gentleman's constituents never see because they do jobs in the back office. The Chief Constable wants to get them out of the back office and into the community, where they will be more visible and able to deliver a more personal policing service.

Weapon Decommissioning (Loyalist Paramilitaries)

2. **Mr. Eddie McGrady** (South Down) (SDLP): What recent assessment he has made of progress on decommissioning of weapons by loyalist paramilitary organisations. [306251]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): The Government remain optimistic that, building on the success of decommissioning already this year, further acts will be completed before the deadline of 9 February 2010.

Mr. McGrady: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Will he tell the House what approaches have been made to the Northern Ireland Office by, or on behalf of, the Ulster Defence Association for funding in anticipation of decommissioning? Is he aware of loyalist paramilitaries making similar approaches to the Irish Government for multi-million pound funding?

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that my focus is on decommissioning, and that my concern is to ensure that decommissioning takes place by 9 February of next year. As for discussions between those engaged in legitimate political activity and the Northern Ireland Office, we will of course be happy to talk to people who are wholly engaged in legitimate political activity and who have eschewed violence of every kind.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Obviously, the entire community wants there to be further progress on loyalist decommissioning. However, will the Secretary of State continue to work in the loyalist working-class estates, where some paramilitary groups have had a stranglehold in the past, to try to ensure that the young people in those communities are not weaned into paramilitarism, but are weaned away from it in favour of the democratic principles that we all espouse?

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about the grip in which some communities were held in the past by the activities of those who do

not respect the rule of law and order. Regrettably, communities in some areas are still held in that same grip. We will do everything that we can, including encouraging and working with the Northern Ireland Executive, to help all communities that have been held in the grip of violence. We will continue to work with them so that they too are able to enjoy the fruits of a normal society.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (UUP): In its discussions with loyalists about decommissioning, can the Northern Ireland Office explain to the House what efforts it has made to glean any information about the whereabouts of Lisa Dorrian, a constituent of mine who was murdered and disappeared almost five years ago by people with loyalist connections?

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Lady has on many occasions raised constituency issues, not least but not only that of Lisa Dorrian. I remember dealing with this when I was a junior Minister, and the hon. Lady never gives up on behalf of the family. It is a tribute to her that she continues to work so hard for her constituents. Of course that remains an ongoing case. Decommissioning is a matter for the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. We may set the framework and the deadline of 9 February, but when that deadline comes to an end, I can promise the hon. Lady that our interest and concern for the family of Lisa Dorrian will continue.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Given that this is the last Northern Ireland questions before the end of the arms amnesty on 9 February, can the Secretary of State give reasons for his reported belief that the UDA will decommission some weapons over Christmas, when it is also reported that the UDA is seeking assurances on the future of power-sharing before it does so? Does the Secretary of State agree that laying down such conditions is unacceptable, because there is no reason or excuse for illegal arms to exist in any part of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Woodward: May I take this opportunity to wish not only the hon. Gentleman but the entire House a happy Christmas on this important occasion? I hope the amnesty means that all hostilities between us will cease. That may be a slightly premature Christmas present, so I am not expecting anything in that box.

On decommissioning, I am interested only in making two things clear: first, that illegally held weapons have no place in society in Northern Ireland or anywhere else, and secondly, that on 9 February the arrangements for decommissioning will come to an end for good, for ever—the end. The IICD will be engaged with a number of organisations. At the end of that process, I hope to report to the House further progress on decommissioning. I am not interested in discussing conditions with any group.

Police Recruitment

3. **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of police recruitment in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [306252]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): Since the introduction of the temporary recruitment provisions in November 2001, there have been 3,751 appointments to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Catholic composition within PSNI regulars currently stands at 27.69 per cent. We remain on track to reach the target of 30 per cent. Catholic composition by March 2011.

Mr. Mackay: That is extremely good news and everybody involved should be congratulated. It has not been easy. Can the Minister give an assurance to the House that once we reach the 30 per cent.—the sooner, the better—the special arrangements will cease and we will return to straightforward recruiting?

Paul Goggins: I welcome the endorsement from the right hon. Gentleman. That is deeply appreciated. It is a mark of how far things have come that we have gone from 8 per cent. Catholic representation to 27 per cent. and on to 30 per cent. I give him the assurance that he seeks. We intend to come to the House in March next year to ask for a renewal of the temporary powers for a further year. We are confident that we will get to 30 per cent. within that year. Indeed, if we reach that level before the end of the year, Ministers intend to come back to the House and rescind the special arrangements.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): In a reply to a parliamentary question that I received yesterday, the Minister informed me that there are currently 5,305 Protestant police officers and 1,904 Catholic police officers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to correct this imbalance?

Paul Goggins: I repeat to my hon. Friend the progress that has been made. There were only 8 per cent. Catholic officers in 1998; that figure is now 27 per cent. and moving to 30 per cent. It was essential that we got a more representative police service in Northern Ireland so that there could be confidence in all sections of the community. It is worth saying that when we go back a decade ago, a plan for policing was emerging in Northern Ireland that many people thought was barely possible. Today we have almost 30 per cent. Catholics; we have every party represented on the Policing Board; and we have all parties unanimously choosing a new Chief Constable. These are amazing achievements in Northern Ireland, and they have come about because of the political will to deliver them.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that before the introduction of a 50:50 quota system, the level of Catholic applications to the Royal Ulster Constabulary stood at 25 per cent., so it is not all down to the 50:50 rule? Does he accept that people want to see the rule done away with and there to be a move towards selection and appointment on merit, untrammelled in that sense? Does he agree that recruitment is important, but that it is also important to retain experienced police officers, both regular and full-time reserve?

Paul Goggins: The hon. Gentleman makes the point that people from the Catholic community applied to join the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and there were many fine Catholic officers in the RUC, but not enough

of them. That is why the temporary provisions were put in place. I can tell him that the application rate from Catholics is now at 38 per cent., so it has moved on. That is encouraging, because once the special provisions are removed, we will want to encourage applicants from all sections of the community so that the police service remains fully representative of the community that it serves.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): To pick up on the Minister's very last point, may I ask what the Government are doing to ensure that the drive towards a representative police force goes beyond the question of simply Protestant or Catholic communities in Northern Ireland? It must include and embrace all communities.

Paul Goggins: The hon. Gentleman makes a point that is not mentioned often enough: we want a police service that is representative of the whole community. It is therefore encouraging that, broadly, ethnic minorities are represented in the police service in the same proportion as they are present in Northern Ireland. Crucially, in the lifetime of the PSNI, the number of women regular officers has doubled from 12 per cent. to 24 per cent. That is also an indication of the influx, the interest and the commitment of women who want to be effective police officers, and it is ensuring that the police service is fully reflective of the community that it serves.

Prison Estate

4. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): What the capacity is of the prison estate in Northern Ireland. [306253]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): The Northern Ireland Prison Service has a capacity of 1,775. The prison estate comprises two adult male prisons and a third establishment that houses both young offenders and women.

Mr. Bellingham: I am grateful to the Minister of State for that reply. Will he tell the House how many prisoners in Northern Ireland suffer from either drug addiction or mental health problems?

Paul Goggins: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. The point of the question is to highlight how many vulnerable prisoners there are in Northern Ireland's prisons, and how many suffer from mental health problems and personality disorders. There are high numbers of such people in prison in Northern Ireland, but he will be encouraged, I am sure, by the fact that about 18 months ago the health service in Northern Ireland took over responsibility for the delivery of health care, including mental health care. I expect to see substantial improvements in the support and service that is provided to vulnerable prisoners as a result of that measure.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Prisons in Northern Ireland are operating at close to full capacity, and for a long time now there have been discussions about the provision of a new prison in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister update us on that situation? Will the planned new prison be affected by the budget difficulties that are going to lead to capital cutbacks?

Paul Goggins: There are today 1,406 prisoners in prison in Northern Ireland, and that is lower than the figure on this day last year, when there were 1,481 prisoners in prisons. We are making available to the courts community sentences, electronic tagging and other measures that mean that, where appropriate, there is an alternative to prison. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to point to the need to improve accommodation. This year we have a new 60-cell block at Magilligan prison and a new 120-cell block at Maghaberry prison, and he and his hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell), who is sitting next to him, will know that there is a clear commitment to rebuilding Magilligan prison. It badly needs rebuilding. The plans are in place, the work can begin in 2012 and the Government are mindful of the fact that it needs to be delivered. In all discussions between the Prime Minister and politicians from Northern Ireland, the need for a sustainable capital commitment to a new prison on the Magilligan site has always been on our minds.

Dissident Republican Groups

5. **John Robertson** (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the threat posed by dissident republican groups; and if he will make a statement. [306254]

8. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security threat in Northern Ireland from dissident republicans. [306257]

9. **Dr. William McCrea** (South Antrim) (DUP): What steps are being taken to reduce the level of activity of dissident republicans in Northern Ireland. [306258]

10. **Angela Watkinson** (Upminster) (Con): What his most recent assessment is of the level of activity of dissident republicans; and if he will make a statement. [306259]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): While the self-styled criminals remain a serious threat, their cowardly actions have been rejected by the majority of people in Northern Ireland. None the less, the Government are not complacent about the threat that those people continue to pose.

John Robertson: My right hon. Friend will be aware of the concerns of the people of Northern Ireland, particularly with reference to a minority dissident republican group that appears to be causing trouble to try to put a stop to the peace process. Will he assure me that that will not happen, that he is working with everybody in Northern Ireland to ensure that it will not, and that that group will be named and dealt with in the appropriate manner?

Mr. Woodward: I am pleased to report that that group is, indeed, being dealt with in the appropriate manner. That follows in part as a result of the extensive co-operation of the community, whose members do not wish to see Northern Ireland plunged into anything like the chaos they saw in the past. I will also say this to my hon. Friend: the dissident groups may wish to undermine the peace process, but they will do so only if they undermine confidence in the political process. If we succeed with the politics, we will preserve the peace.

Andrew Rosindell: Given the recent resignation of the prison governor and the sale of a judge's home owing to dissident threats, what can the Secretary of State tell us about the action that the Government are taking to ensure the protection of prominent public figures?

Mr. Woodward: The prison governor made it clear that his reasons for resignation, which we regret, were a matter of personal circumstances. My hon. Friend the Minister is making the appropriate arrangements in relation to that. As regards threats to individuals posed by the self-styled dissident groups, we will do everything we can to protect people in Northern Ireland. It is clear that this small minority of people, who have no support in the community, would like to undermine public confidence. We will ensure that those who promote peace and the politics and the institutions of Northern Ireland have the appropriate protection that they deserve.

Dr. McCrea: I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware that the media have been endeavouring to connect the devolution of policing and justice with dissident republican activity. What steps are the Government taking to defeat dissident republicans? Does the Secretary of State understand that no political stunts or intimidation of Unionists will weaken our resolve in ensuring that policing and justice are devolved when there is community confidence, which means dealing with and resolving the issues, including the parades issue?

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Gentleman will know that following the attacks at Massereene in his constituency in March, measures of public confidence were extremely high, not least because the public in Northern Ireland saw politicians across the divide come together with a unity of purpose. I believe, as the Independent Monitoring Commission report recently observed, that early completion of the devolution of policing and justice from Westminster to Stormont would be a potent intervention against these people. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about community confidence, but there could be no greater sign of confidence than the completion of the devolution of policing and justice.

Angela Watkinson: The Secretary of State will know that some in the security services believe that there is an intelligence deficit with regard to dissident republican groups. Does he share that concern, and what steps is he taking to overcome that problem?

Mr. Woodward: First, many of these matters relate to the operational independence of the Chief Constable, which I am sure that all hon. Members would respect. We are ensuring that the resources are there for the security services in Northern Ireland and the PSNI. The hon. Lady will know that in order to meet this challenge, the Prime Minister has made additional reserves available to the PSNI this year and guaranteed it additional money next year. As for intelligence about these dissident groups, I congratulate the PSNI and the security services, who have consistently managed to thwart these people, whose objective is to undermine confidence and damage the peace process itself.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State agree that any threat to the stability of our political institutions feeds into the warped thinking of the so-called dissident so-called republican groups? Does he further agree that the sooner we can agree on the devolution of justice and policing, avoid any threat of the collapse of our institutions, and reject any speculation that Sinn Fein may be planning to withdraw from policing arrangements such as district policing partnerships, the sooner we will defy the agenda of the dissident groups?

Mr. Woodward: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman's remarks. I wish to note, and the House will wish to record, that only in the past few weeks those at Stormont have completed the passage of the Department of Justice Bill, which would enable a Justice Department to be created, and invite the identification of a Justice Minister. Progress is being made. Let us not allow the dissidents any voice at all; let us have a show of confidence and complete the devolution of policing and justice. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There are far too many private conversations taking place in the Chamber. The House must come to order. I know that hon. and right hon. Members will want to listen intently to the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—I call Sir Patrick Cormack.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and a very merry Christmas.

Does the Secretary of State agree that 2009 would have been a very much blacker year had it not been for the achievements of the PSNI in defusing some terrible bombs that could have caused enormous harm? Will he give the House the categorical assurance that the PSNI will be kept up to strength and increased in strength to combat that terrible threat?

Mr. Woodward: May I first take this opportunity on behalf of the House to record our thanks to the hon. Gentleman for his tireless work in Northern Ireland and with the Select Committee? I say that conscious of the decision that he has announced in relation to next year. We thank him for what he has done, and the people of Northern Ireland are extremely grateful for his work and that of his Committee.

The work of the PSNI in 2009 has been tireless and successful, despite enormous provocation. The House will wish to know that had the bomb intended for the Policing Board headquarters gone off, it would have caused certainly severe damage to the building and probably severe loss of life. Brilliant work by the PSNI and the services across the board continues to ensure that these criminals who call themselves dissidents do not succeed. I only hope that next year will be an even better year for the PSNI.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): May I strongly endorse the comments of the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee about the performance of the PSNI this year?

We do not underestimate the threat posed by dissidents, but we firmly believe that the response must be proportionate. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that every part of Northern Ireland is policed on a regular basis to ensure the confidence of all parts of the community in the effectiveness of the PSNI?

Mr. Woodward: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and join in his observations. The objective of these criminals is not damage to a building or even the loss of life but to undermine confidence in the politics and damage the peace process. We must all bear in mind that they seek to wreck the political process and in turn the peace process, and I can confidently say that this House will not allow them to succeed in that.

Mr. Paterson: A few weeks ago, the Conservatives agreed to endorse the substantial financial package that would follow the devolution of policing and justice. Given the current threat, has the Secretary of State considered drawing on parts of that package in advance to enable the Chief Constable to deliver more effective policing?

Mr. Woodward: My hon. Friend the Security Minister and I are in regular discussions with the Chief Constable, who of course has operational independence on these matters. The hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made available nearly £30 million of extra money this year for the PSNI and has offered more than that for next year. That money has not been exhausted, but my right hon. Friend has made it very clear to the Chief Constable that he is always open to representations from him because regardless of circumstances, this Government stand with the people of Northern Ireland.

Peace Process (Ministerial Discussions)

6. **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the US Secretary of State on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [306255]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): I regularly have discussions with Secretary of State Clinton and also with the US special envoy, Declan Kelly.

Mr. Burns: Does the Secretary of State fully appreciate the support of the Conservative party for the tremendous efforts of the Americans, and particularly the Clinton Administration, in keeping the peace process on track? Following Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent visit to Northern Ireland, does he anticipate further economic investment there?

Mr. Woodward: The people of Northern Ireland are extremely grateful for the investment that has been made by the United States, which has allowed several hundred new jobs to be created this year in Northern Ireland despite the international recession. The decision by Secretary of State Clinton to create a special economic envoy, Declan Kelly, meant that only last week, 14 top American companies made presentations to the Administration in Northern Ireland looking at investment for next year. Secretary Clinton and President Obama have made it clear that their support will be as unstinting and relentless as that of Presidents Bush and Clinton before them.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What work is being undertaken by the Northern Ireland Office further to integrate the areas across the divide in Northern Ireland, particularly in social housing? What is the NIO doing to remove the dreadful physical barriers that divide the two communities?

Mr. Woodward: My hon. Friend will know that many of those matters have now of course been devolved. However, I simply say this to him: established in the Good Friday agreement and endorsed in the St. Andrews agreement were the principles of equality and justice for everybody in Northern Ireland, regardless of faith and geography, to ensure that they enjoy shared power and a shared future that is fair.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [307388] **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 16 December.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): I have been asked to reply.

I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our profound condolences to the families and friends of the two soldiers from 3rd Battalion The Rifles who died in Afghanistan yesterday. We send our deepest sympathies to their families. This Christmas, we will all be thinking of the bravery and dedication of our armed forces overseas, and especially at this time of year, of the families who support them.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in Copenhagen. This morning he met the UN Secretary-General; this afternoon he will address the assembly.

Mr. Mackay: The whole House will endorse what the right hon. and learned Lady said about those fallen soldiers, and our thoughts will very much be with their families.

However, may I turn to the home front and other families who will be desperately worried that their own loved ones might not return home for Christmas because of the British Airways cabin crew strike? Although there has been good news this morning that Unite and British Airways might now be talking, may I have an assurance from the deputy Prime Minister that she will use her considerable influence with the trade unions to ensure that this damaging strike is called off as soon as possible?

Ms Harman: Both the Prime Minister and the Transport Secretary have said that they, like I am sure everyone in the whole House, want to see that a strike does not take place. That is important not only for those who have travel plans this Christmas either to go abroad to see their families or to have their families join them, but for the long-term future of BA. I hope that when the talks take place this afternoon, they will reach a settlement.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley) (Lab): We wish the Prime Minister well in the current talks in Copenhagen. We need a united position with our European partners

to reach agreement in those vital talks. How much harder does my right hon. and learned Friend think it would be to reach such an agreement if we were isolated in Europe? Does she share my concern at the divisions in the group of allies of the Conservatives in Europe—more than half of their group opposes the European targets?

Ms Harman: As the Prime Minister said, it is an uphill task at Copenhagen, but there could not be a more important task than to get all the countries of the world to agree on tackling climate change. As my hon. Friend says, there is indeed a contrast between the Prime Minister at the centre of events—*[Interruption.]* He was the first world leader to decide personally to go to Copenhagen. What a contrast, as he works with other world leaders, that the shadow Foreign Secretary has not even been able to persuade his own side that climate change is important.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks) (Con): May I join the Leader of the House in recording our sadness at the news last night of the death of two British soldiers from 3rd Battalion The Rifles serving in Afghanistan? Over Christmas and the new year, the untiring efforts of our servicemen and women serving their country in a theatre of war must never be far from our minds.

The House of Commons is today rising unusually early for Christmas—the earliest we have risen for Christmas for 31 years—and I want to ask the Leader of the House about three particular pressing issues on which the Government will not be able to report to Parliament over the next three weeks. One indeed is the vital negotiations at Copenhagen, in which we wish the Prime Minister and other British representatives every success, although we should have been able to hear about the outcome next week, not just the prospects this week. Does she share our concern about the comments by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, reported this morning, that a firm commitment on the proposed fund for developing countries to tackle climate change may be set aside and not addressed until next year? After the Prime Minister spoke to the Secretary-General this morning, what were the chances of that major setback being averted?

Ms Harman: The point that the right hon. Gentleman makes about the House is somewhat spurious. We are rising early, but we are coming back early.

It is indeed important that we have not only a political agreement at Copenhagen, but legally binding targets that are independently verifiable and this $10 billion fund to ensure that the developing countries—the emerging economies—can play their part in the effort to tackle climate change. That is a difficult challenge. The Prime Minister, the Secretary-General of the UN and world leaders are working on it today, and I hope that the whole House will wish them well.

Mr. Hague: Well, we do wish them well, and I know that the Leader of the House will agree with me that in particular we must address the serious issue of the destruction of the world's rainforests. As she thinks that we are not addressing this issue seriously, it is good to know that what we proposed last month the Government have since agreed to propose—that additional significant EU financial support should be given to developing countries to halt deforestation. Will the Government now also agree with one of the proposals I made three weeks ago—to set an example to other nations and show that we will take determined action under domestic law by making the import, possession and distribution of illegally harvested timber an offence under UK law?

Ms Harman: I am sure that we will take every action possible, and we have already taken action to ensure that only sustainable timber is used. I did make a comment about the right hon. Gentleman's party, and this week 11 Conservative Members have been party to the production of a report entitled "Climate change is natural: 100 reasons why", claiming that it is nothing to worry about. We will deal with domestic law to protect timber and we will ensure that we take the action internationally to tackle deforestation: he should deal with Conservative Members who are climate change deniers.

Mr. Hague: I hope that the Leader of the House will indeed take seriously what we have proposed and look at what I have just put to her, because it may help the Government to take the issue seriously, as well as the Opposition. We look forward to that.

On another issue that requires urgent attention in this House, does the Leader of the House agree with the Foreign Secretary that, following the issuing of an arrest warrant for the Israeli Opposition leader Mrs. Livni, Parliament needs to look urgently at ways in which the system might be changed? While we all agree that allegations of human rights violations by all sides in the Gaza conflict need to be addressed, how is Britain meant to play a leading role in the middle east peace process if Israeli politicians cannot visit Britain without fear of arrest?

Ms Harman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the Foreign Secretary's words. We should be in no doubt that it is important for Israel's leaders to be able to talk to Ministers in this country. Israel is an important strategic partner and we need to ensure that the situation is as the Foreign Secretary said it should be.

Mr. Hague: Can the Leader of the House shed a little more light on this? When the International Criminal Court Act 2001 was introduced, it was never meant by any one in this House to obstruct normal diplomatic business such as the vital work of the middle east peace process. Senior serving politicians, to whom we all need to talk every day, were not meant to be affected in this way, as we understand it. Can she say whether magistrates are applying the law correctly? If they are not interpreting the law correctly, will the Government give fresh advice on that point. If they are interpreting the law correctly, what will the Government do about it and when will a Minister come to the House to report on this and say what they propose to do?

Ms Harman: I think that I am in a position to tell the House that we agree. Our objectives are the same as those set out by the right hon. Gentleman, and Ministers will be looking at the matter and ensuring that the situation is resolved.

Mr. Hague: I thank the Leader of the House for that, and I hope that they will do so quickly and report to the House when it returns.

On a further issue needing urgent attention, and which might become the biggest threat to world peace in 2010, do the Government agree that Iran's continued failure to come to an agreement on its nuclear programme, and the mounting evidence of its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, make the need to agree vastly strengthened sanctions of immense and pressing importance? Will the Government commit during the recess to do their utmost to accelerate agreement on European Union sanctions and the new UN Security Council resolution that is urgently needed?

Ms Harman: Yes, I think that we can agree that we want to ensure that the threat from Iran, which we have never underestimated, is recognised with increasing sanctions. I would certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Once again, that is something else that the Foreign Secretary will be taking forward.

Mr. Hague: We know that the Foreign Secretary will be taking that forward, but the Prime Minister has twice announced new sanctions against Iran without them ever taking effect. Is it not time for the Prime Minister to ensure that an effective new wave of sanctions is set out, including a ban on any new European investment in Iranian oil and gas—something that he announced in the middle of last year—and serious financial sanctions such as those that exist in the United States? Will she ensure, as Leader of the House, that a statement will be made to Parliament early in the new year by the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary about what this country, the European Union and the UN Security Council are prepared to do at this critical point?

Ms Harman: Indeed, the Prime Minister mentioned that in his statement following the European Council, and as Leader of the House I ensure that the House is kept updated on this important issue.

How telling it is, however, that on this day, when we have seen employment rise, the number of people in work increase and the number of people claiming unemployment benefit fall for the first time in two years, those things have not had a mention. I would have thought that today was the day when the shadow Foreign Secretary would come to the House and admit that the Tories had got it wrong.

Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Lab): Has my right hon. and learned Friend seen today's *Daily Record*, which exposed a legalised lending company charging an annual percentage rate of 2,639,538.9 per cent? Is it not about time that we followed the lead of European countries and put a cap on interest charges, especially in the run-up to Christmas?

Ms Harman: I congratulate the *Daily Record* on its campaign against loan-sharking. It is important that we inform everybody that Government-funded money advice centres are there to help people, that in all areas there are loan-sharking investigation teams and that people can look to their credit unions for help. For many families, there is a lot of pressure at Christmas, so they should take advice and use credit unions.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): May I add our condolences in respect of the two servicemen who died serving this country in Afghanistan?

One of the Government's achievements is that the share of tax revenue in the economy has now fallen to the lowest level since the days of Harold Macmillan. Yet, this week, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs estimated that about £40 billion is not being collected and is being evaded. Where is that money? *[Interruption.]*

Ms Harman *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I ask the Leader of the House to wait. Government Back Benchers are in an especially boisterous mood today, but I want to make progress down the Order Paper and get as many people in as possible.

Ms Harman: As the hon. Gentleman knows well, tax revenue has fallen because if fewer houses are being bought and sold, stamp duty falls, and if unemployment increases, there are fewer people paying taxes. Corporation tax has also fallen. Tax revenue has fallen because this country has been hit by a global economic recession.

We have been determined to take measures to stop tax avoidance, and we think it important that an example be set not only in this House, but in the House of Lords. According to an old saying, there should be no taxation without representation. What about no representation without taxation? We will introduce legislation to ensure that people are domiciled, resident and ordinarily resident in order to sit in this House or in the House of Lords.

Dr. Cable: I take that point, but perhaps make it in a less partisan way—*[Interruption]*—and perhaps commend the leader of the Conservative party for the helpful suggestion of new legislation, based on Liberal Democrat proposals, so that Members of the Houses of Commons and Lords who are non-doms should not sit in Parliament. May I welcome the fact that there is such enthusiasm, from turkeys voting for Christmas, and suggest that the Leader of the House give immediate effect to their wishes, by bringing in an amendment to the Constitutional Reform Bill, so that non-doms such as Lord Ashcroft can leave Parliament immediately?

Ms Harman: We certainly need transparency on the issue, and as I said, we will bring forward legislation. The hon. Gentleman is busy commending the Conservative party; at the risk of being accused of being partisan, I would like to complain about the Conservative party. The deputy chairman of the Conservative party made a promise to the honours committee—this pertains to the need for legislation—that he would make his tax affairs on shore. The Foreign Secretary—*[Interruption]*—the shadow Foreign Secretary—can tell us what the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury says he knows. Has Lord Ashcroft—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady, but we need not pursue that point any further.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): The Efford community in my constituency is a strong community, but does my right hon. and learned Friend

understand the shock, horror and dismay at the crimes for which a nursery worker received an indeterminate sentence yesterday? Will she work with me to ensure that the lessons of the serious case review, which can now move rapidly to a conclusion, are fully and speedily learned?

Ms Harman: I agree with my hon. Friend. Everybody has the utmost sympathy for the parents whose children were at that nursery and will expect, as there have been, stiff sentences in that case. If there are any lessons to be learnt, from what we hope is an exceptional incident, I am sure that they will be learnt by the serious case review panel.

Q2. [307389] **Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory** (Wells) (Con): In 1998, the Government put into law their code for fiscal stability, since when the so-called golden rule on borrowing has been broken in every year since 2001. If we are to have any confidence in the announced Fiscal Responsibility Bill, can the deputy Prime Minister tell us what penalties will apply to Ministers who break that law? Will there be fines or loss of office—or worse—for such Ministers, or is this just another Labour gimmick?

Ms Harman: The Fiscal Responsibility Bill lays out a statutory responsibility and a statutory duty, and this House will hold Ministers to account. I would say that it is fiscally responsible to ensure that the economy grows and that we do not pull the plug on it. Although we are seeing encouraging signs, the recovery is still fragile. We want to ensure that we have fiscal responsibility when it comes to taxation to help the public finances and that those who are best off pay most. As well as putting the public finances back on a proper footing, we want to ensure that we protect public services. All of those are the fiscally responsible things to do.

Mr. William Bain (Glasgow, North-East) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that one of the best measures for tackling inequality of assets in this country is the child trust fund, which benefits 3,941 children in my constituency? Does she also agree that the very worst measure would be an inheritance tax cut for millionaires?

Ms Harman: The reason why none of my hon. Friend's constituents would benefit from the Conservatives' tax cuts for millionaires is that they live in Glasgow, not in Notting Hill Gate. He can rely on this Government to protect his constituents with measures such as the child trust fund.

Q3. [307390] **Simon Hughes** (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): On equality, given that in the past parliamentary decade, which ends today, Labour Cabinet Ministers have paid themselves an increase of more than £30,000, how does the Leader of the House justify the fact that the increase in Cabinet salaries alone is greater than the annual take-home wage of the people she is elected to represent?

Ms Harman: The pay of all Cabinet Ministers—and, indeed, of all Ministers—has been frozen, and Cabinet Ministers and Ministers have also agreed to forgo their pay increase as Members of Parliament.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Transport said that the electrification of the midland main line was a matter not of whether but of when. Will my right hon. and learned Friend give her support to ensuring that that happens as soon as possible, as it is vital to the economy of the country?

Ms Harman: I give my strong support to the proposal that my hon. Friend has mentioned. It is important that we invest in our economic infrastructure—transport is an important part of that—as we have done consistently over the past 10 years.

Q4. [307391] **Mr. Mark Francois** (Rayleigh) (Con): This morning, I visited a homelessness project run by the charity Crisis. One in 20 of the people that it is likely to cater for this Christmas will be homeless ex-service personnel. Given everything that those people have already done to serve their country, is there more that the Government can do to honour the military covenant and to focus on serving the health and welfare needs of those people who have so bravely served us?

Ms Harman: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should do everything possible, as part of the military covenant, to support our serving military forces in the field, our ex-servicemen and women, and their families. If he would like to make any suggestions about this, I am sure that they would be well received by the Defence Secretary.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My constituent, Leon Jones, was just 21 when he was killed in a fatal stabbing near his home recently, devastating his family, friends and the local community. Already, that local community has been proactive in raising awareness of the possession of knives, and of knife crime. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that such campaigns are needed, along with tough laws? Will she give the House an assurance that this Government will raise the minimum sentence for murder by knife from 15 to 25 years?

Ms Harman: First, I would like to express my sincere condolences—as my hon. Friend has done—to the family of Leon Jones for the terrible loss that they have suffered as a result of his tragic death. We have to take knife crime very seriously, and we are upgrading the sentencing to put it on a par with gun crime. Everything must be done to protect people and to send out the message that knife crime cannot be accepted.

Q5. [307392] **Mr. Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware that a planning application to build a massive distribution centre at Pyestock, on the border of my constituency and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), was refused by the local authority? The appeal was rejected by the inspector, yet an unelected Minister, Lord McKenzie, who knows nothing about the area, allowed the planning application to go through. Is this what the Government mean by supporting local democracy?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman will know what the planning processes involve. They have been laid out and agreed under statute by this House, and if he had any proposals, he should have put them forward in the Planning Bill.

Mr. Anthony Wright (Great Yarmouth) (Lab): All the schools in my constituency have benefited immensely from the investment of this Government in terms of both staffing and capital costs. Just last week, the Great Yarmouth high school heard an announcement that it was going to receive £12.5 million from the Building Schools for the Future fund. Can my right hon. and learned Friend guarantee that any future Labour Government will continue with that Building Schools for the Future fund to ensure that investment in education continues?

Ms Harman: The Building Schools for the Future fund has been important not only to make up the backlog and legacy of disrepair in our schools but in ensuring that our young people and children are educated in the best possible facilities. It has also provided much-needed help for the construction industry at a time when private sector construction has been facing tremendous difficulties. That is one of the reasons why we have not pulled the plug on public investment in construction in the way that the Conservatives have insisted that we should.

Q6. [307393] **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): Copenhagen is the land of make-believe and fairy tales. Does the Leader of the House have a favourite fairy tale? Could it be the Emperor's new clothes? Is she the little robber girl or is she really the princess?

Ms Harman: We could learn a lesson from fairy tales, which is that you need to avoid the brothers Grimm, which we would get if they—*[Laughter.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I say to right hon. and hon. Members that good humour is one thing, but disorder is another. We have to try to impress and reassure the public, not to disgust them.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): The Leader of the House may recall on that on 7 May I drew to her attention the plight of migrant workers and those people whose papers are languishing in Lunar house, Croydon, where a parlous state is prevailing. Will she arrange for a meeting with the charity London Citizens and faith groups, including Bishop Patrick Lynch and his Anglican and Methodist colleagues, to discuss the problems of migrant workers and those people whose status here is yet to be determined?

Ms Harman: I will ensure that there is a meeting of the relevant Minister with London Citizens, which is a very good organisation to whose work I would like to pay tribute. I am sure that it will be reassured to know how fast the backlog is being reduced under the leadership of the Home Secretary.

Q7. [307394] **Mr. James Arbuthnot** (North-East Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) has mentioned the mega Pyestock warehouse on the borders of our constituencies. Is the deputy Prime Minister aware that the decision of the noble Lord, overruling 12,000 local residents and the local councils and her own inspector, was taken in the rather doubtful interests of employment, but against the interests—*[Interruption.]*—because the jobs the Minister suggested might be created are very doubtful—but against the interests—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The question was too long.

Ms Harman: I cannot assist the right hon. Gentleman further except to repeat my answer to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). These are decisions made under a legal framework. They are made as ministerial decisions, but in the public interest. One public interest that the planning system is determined to promote is employment, and I would have thought that the right hon. Gentleman agreed with that.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway) (Lab): On the subject of the Geneva Conventions Act, will my right hon. and learned Friend take this opportunity to reassert the principle of judicial independence and, in particular, the power of the courts to issue criminal process against anybody—whatever side they are on, whatever their status, rank or influence against whom good prima facie evidence has been laid?

Ms Harman: Of course that is the case. The courts act judicially and independently under the framework of law, both national and international, and we have to make sure that we not only guarantee judicial independence, but have the right legal framework.

Q8. [307395] **Mr. Roger Williams** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): Today, the UK Payments Council meets to determine the future use of cheques and it is anticipated that it will recommend their phasing out by 2018. Many older people and small businesses, especially those without access to the internet, continue to use cheques and value their convenience. What steps will the Government take to save the cheque and to ensure that vulnerable people and small businesses can continue to use this form of payment?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman has made a significant point, particularly in relation to older people. The Equality Bill ensures that public authorities making those changes must take account of the interests of older people, and must not take steps that discriminate against them. We need to look to the future, but also to ensure that older people do not suffer as a result.

Q9. [307396] **Mr. Clive Betts** (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend join me in welcoming the measures in the Local Transport Act 2008 that enable elected local transport authorities to introduce quality contracts giving them power to determine local bus routes, frequencies and fares? Does she agree that any proposal to revoke those powers would remove from local communities the right to make decisions about their own bus services, and would be entirely contrary to the principle of local democratic accountability?

Ms Harman: I think that those quality contracts represent an important step forward, and that it would be folly for the Local Transport Act powers to be revoked. That is one of the things that the Conservative party is threatening to do, and it should not happen.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Is not part of the problem the fact that we have an Administration run by Tweedledee and Tweedledum? As we approach 2010, if the Prime Minister really does want to give the people of this country a great new year cheer, he will announce a general election sooner rather than later.

Ms Harman: I do not think that that turkey is going to fly.

Q10. [307397] **Mr. Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I frequently receive representations from small businesses in my constituency about the costs of Government regulation. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, in these difficult times, it is essential for the Government to reduce the burden of regulation, and can she tell me what the Government are doing about it?

Ms Harman: We are ensuring that the Government help business, both big and small. One of the things that we have done is help businesses to defer their tax under the time-to-pay scheme. I think that the most important announcement for small business over the past few weeks was the Chancellor's announcement in the pre-Budget report that that scheme would continue. We want to do all that we can to help small businesses. One of the things that we will not be doing is abolishing the regional development agencies, which are so important to helping small businesses but which the Tories would abolish.

Nimrod Review

12.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): Seven weeks ago, I addressed the House about Mr. Charles Haddon-Cave's report on the events leading to the loss of 14 service personnel aboard Nimrod XV230 on 2 September 2006. As I said then, it was a tough read. It spelt out in detail the many failings both in the MOD and in industry that led to the tragedy. I wish again to express my sorrow for what happened that day, and to reiterate my sincere apologies to the families of those who died. I know that nothing I can say will bring those 14 men back. What we must do now is learn all the lessons, and take all the actions that are necessary to implement them.

Mr. Haddon-Cave's investigations were wide-ranging. His report was thorough and detailed. I want to thank him again for his efforts, and for helping us to identify the changes that we need to make. Today I shall explain to the House how we are implementing his recommendations. Some of them are complex, and I am therefore placing in the Library of the House a more detailed written response to the 84 recommendations.

This afternoon I want to focus on three areas: the creation of a military aviation authority, the changes that we are making to the management of airworthiness, and our relationship with industry.

The Nimrod XV230 was lost as a result of a number of failings in the MOD and industry over a period of some three decades. Opportunities to discover and avoid the dangers, particularly during the development of the safety case, were missed. That was due in part to specific errors, but it was also due to the fact that the MOD's aviation safety processes had become too cumbersome and complex, and lacked transparency and accountability. Despite the efforts of many hard-working men and women in the MOD and the private sector to deliver safe aircraft, the result was simply not good enough.

The report recognised—and indeed welcomed—the many improvements we had made since the loss of the XV230, but it also made it clear that we needed to go much further. I agree, and I am today announcing the most radical reform of the MOD's airworthiness procedures since military aviation began.

First, we are creating a new independent military aviation authority that will regulate, audit and assure all military aviation activity. It will be led by a senior—three-star—military officer, supported by a staff of about 250 personnel. He will provide the leadership on airworthiness, and also the independent assurance that we and our industry partners are all operating to the highest safety standards. He will have been identified and appointed by February, and the new authority will begin its work from April next year. The MAA will be independent of those who fly and maintain our aircraft day to day, ensuring that they operate fully within the regulations and are properly equipped, trained and resourced to deliver safe aircraft to the services.

In proposing this new organisation for the management of airworthiness, Mr. Haddon-Cave wanted to ensure that there would be responsiveness in the face of changing operational circumstances, and that a safe approach would be adopted at all times. I agree, but in order to make his recommendations effective in the military environment, some adjustments are necessary. The single service assistant chiefs of staff must retain responsibility for determining that our aircraft can be safely released into service. The MAA will provide full assurance, but it will not carry out this release-to-service role directly. For operational emergency clearances, I have decided to opt for a tighter regime than Mr. Haddon-Cave proposed, under which the assistant chiefs—not those who fly the aircraft at the front line—will be responsible for any clearances. The MAA will play an assurance role in this area, too. This refinement of the Haddon-Cave model will deliver his intention while retaining operational agility, and improve on both our current and his proposed governance arrangements.

Mr. Haddon-Cave also recommended a new approach to aviation safety cases. He was critical of our current approach, saying that it was bureaucratic and, frankly, missed the point. I agree. We need to make it simpler and more relevant. The MAA will rewrite our instructions to include the improvements that the report recommends. I have instructed that we examine how to apply this best practice appropriately across the whole of defence. We are also auditing the standard of our current aviation safety cases to check that they are fit for purpose. Most of this work has been completed, and it will be finalised in the next couple of weeks.

I now turn to the criticisms of our relationships with industry. The Department has been working with BAE Systems and QinetiQ to address their failings identified in the report. BAE Systems has announced the appointment of Dr. Chris Elliott to provide independent support to the group managing director in undertaking a review of the company's approach to product safety. QinetiQ has appointed Sir Robert Nelson QC to oversee the company's formal investigation, which will include a review of processes, structure and reporting. All their findings will be shared with us.

Partnership with industry has always been part of ensuring that our troops are provided with the best possible equipment and support. We recognise that partnership does not mean that we can just transfer work to industry; we still have a role to play. That is why we are improving the skills of our people to ensure that we manage industry's activities on our behalf more effectively. A review of the contract conditions that we put in place with industry is also being conducted. We will institute improved checks and audits by the MAA on industry compliance. However, I acknowledge that we need to do more, so I have asked my noble Friend the Minister of State, Lord Drayson, as part of the work that he is doing on defence acquisition reform, to establish a much clearer understanding of the different roles and interests of industry and of the MOD, and to be sure that industry's efforts meet our needs.

In the course of his report, Mr. Haddon-Cave also criticised the personal conduct of a small number of civilians and service people who held positions in the MOD and in industry in the period leading up to 2006. A number of those individuals work for BAE Systems or for QinetiQ, both of which are conducting their own investigations, and a number of others are now retired. Neither of the two serving RAF officers who were named currently holds a position related in any way to safety. An RAF police investigation is being conducted into the issues raised by Mr. Haddon-Cave. I hope that

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

hon. Members will understand that I am unable to comment further on these matters at present. There is an expectation that in some such situations, investigations are accompanied by blameless suspensions of the individuals under investigation. We will re-examine this area to develop a common practice for all MOD personnel—military and civilian.

Mr. Haddon-Cave's analysis and conclusions on safety management in aviation have wider relevance, and we are looking to see what changes we may need to make across other domains in defence. He made a number of broader observations on areas that were not the main focus of his report. Mr. Haddon-Cave did not take evidence on the Department's approach to change management. However, I will ensure that his observations on these important issues are reflected in our planned work on the organisation and culture of the MOD, as part of the preparations for the future defence review.

Every effort is being made by the Department to ensure that our armed forces are the best trained and the best equipped, but we must recognise that the work of defence is inherently dangerous. We ask our armed forces to place themselves in harm's way, and that entails risk. At the same time, any organisation that wants to learn and improve must change and develop; our armed forces cannot stand still in the face of developing threats and the need to work in hostile environments. It is also vital that we do everything possible to use public money effectively and efficiently. However, I am clear that change and development and the management of risk cannot be incompatible with a clear commitment and approach to safety.

My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces and I have been clear throughout that the Ministry of Defence will be open and honest about our shortcomings, and we will respond vigorously and face the challenge to improve performance. I regret enormously the deaths of those on the XV230, and apologise for the part the Department played in failing to prevent them. The measures that I have announced today reflect a personal commitment to improving safety in military aviation and the safety of our armed forces.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and for prior sight of it, as well as for details of the recommendations that the Government intend to implement and those that they intend not to accept.

Charles Haddon-Cave's report was, for many of us, the most damning thing that we had ever seen in our time in Parliament. His criticism of the Nimrod safety case was excoriating. Let me remind the House that he said that it

"was a lamentable job from start to finish. It was riddled with errors. It missed the key dangers. Its production is a story of incompetence, complacency, and cynicism."

It is a report that I think we will all remember, however long we serve in this House. The bottom line is that 14 men died in a tragedy that was wholly avoidable. There were previous warnings and previous incidents, but appropriate action was not taken, and two major companies with international reputations, as well as the MOD, are involved.

I do not think that anybody in this House wants a witch hunt. No one is seeking scapegoats for the sake of having scapegoats, but as well as ensuring that, as the Secretary of State said, no repetition occurs, we also need to know who takes responsibility for what happened—responsibility as regards the families who have lost loved ones, and the armed forces. As we have often said in this House, we have two duties to our armed forces—to ensure that we do everything we can both to provide them with the maximum chance of success in their mission, and to minimise their risk in carrying out that mission. We have to ensure that they have confidence in the high-tech equipment on which they increasingly rely.

I welcome the measures set out in the Secretary of State's statement and in the Government's wider detailed response, including the setting up of the military aviation authority. However, given the complexity of the issue, I am sure that the Secretary of State will understand that we will want to look at this in greater detail, and in particular at the recommendations that the Government do not want to implement. It is worth praising MOD staff for having acted expeditiously in going through the report and ensuring that these items can be implemented as soon as possible.

I have some specific questions, but before I come to them let me say that overall, responsibility for technical issues needs to lie with technical experts. I have to say—as I did seven weeks ago—that I still have worries about the quality of advice being passed up the chain. Is the Secretary of State satisfied that sufficient and independent assessment of technical advice is being given to Ministers? There is no point in making Ministers responsible if they are not safeguarded in the quality of the advice that they receive.

The MOD pays to be an intelligent customer, so how does the Secretary of State specifically assess the role of QinetiQ in making the MOD an intelligent customer in this case? Why the delay in the QinetiQ and BAE responses? They knew that the report was coming, they had ample time to make their case and it is simply not good enough. We in this House and the families deserve a full and proper explanation, and delays and excuses about who has retired simply will not wash.

Let me turn to the specific issues. Will the Secretary of State first tell us how much the setting up and running costs of the MAA will be, and which budgets they will come from? Will he explain in a little more detail than he did in his statement why the new MAA will not have release-to-service responsibility? Is it, as I think he implied, because it is not just about the safety of the aircraft but about the fact that the environment in which they will have to operate will be taken into account, as will the specific circumstances at the time? If that is so, how do we avoid the risk of cutting corners and finding ourselves with the potential of another tragic event? In a culture—whether we like it or not—of increasing legal liability, it is a worry to all of us in this House as well as to our armed forces that we seem now to be compounding warfare with lawfare.

I have three other specific questions that I would like to put to the Secretary of State. Does he accept, and does the MOD accept, that it was a mistake to abolish the post of chief engineer of the RAF? To amplify what he has said already, can he give a categorical assurance,

given that the airworthiness regime is consistent across the air domain, that all air assets in all three service are "safe to fly"? Can he guarantee that the imperative of speed in introducing urgent operational requirements to platforms for theatre has in no way degraded the airworthiness case of the aircraft being deployed?

I turn briefly to the question of compensation. No sum of money can compensate for the loss of a loved one. None the less, compensation is at least in part an act of atonement that recognises responsibility for failure. Does the Secretary of State agree that any level of compensation set has to reflect that concept adequately? Will he ensure that the process of compensation occurs expeditiously and accurately? At the same time, will he also ensure that the same applies to pension arrangements, because, as he will be aware, some of the families have concerns about the accuracy of the system?

I shall end as I started, by speaking about the avoidable deaths of 14 of our service personnel. Their families will bear their loss for ever, and this is a very difficult time of year for them. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing the families, to the best extent that circumstances will allow, a happy and peaceful Christmas.

Mr. Ainsworth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for many of the comments that he has made, a large number of which I totally and absolutely agree with. Equally, I want to thank him, on behalf of the staff of the MOD, for the kind comments that he has made about how they have responded to the report. I think that their response has been exemplary.

The hon. Gentleman asked about speed, but in these circumstances it is important to balance speed of reaction with thoroughness and not making mistakes. That is something that we have to think about, but I hope that we have got the balance right by establishing the MAA and looking at these complex issues to try to get a new system in place. I know that the families want us to move as quickly as possible to learn the lessons of what led to the loss of their loved ones, but equally they want us to learn those lessons genuinely and thoroughly.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the advice that I get within the Department. I have been in the MOD for two and half years now, and I find it to be packed with talented and dedicated people who are prepared to look, learn and challenge the perceived wisdom all the time. I try to encourage that attitude and atmosphere, so that people are not stifled in what they say and do, and so that we get as broad an internal view on these issues as we can.

From time to time, however, we need to use outside expertise to enable us to see through our own failings, or, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the failings of others. That is when we bring in someone like Mr. Haddon-Cave to help us. I think that he has done a thorough job, and that he has identified lessons that badly need to be learned.

I cannot talk in detail about the exact reaction of QinetiQ and BAE Systems. I spoke to Mr. Haddon-Cave again only yesterday, and I think that both companies are now moving in the right direction. I cannot say whether they were as shocked as we were by the report's findings in the initial days, and I do not want to dwell on that. I think that we need to look forward.

The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) also asked about compensation. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces has met the families repeatedly, so he gets the criticisms and pressures directly, as did I when I used to hold that job. I hope—indeed, I am repeatedly assured—that we are not the cause of any delay in settling compensation claims. That is what I am told, but my hon. Friend is sitting front and centre on this, trying to make absolutely certain that we are not the cause of delay. In no way do we want to aggravate in any way the sorrow and the loss suffered by the families. We need to be seen to be getting on with this job. If blame has to be apportioned between us and the companies involved, that is something that we can sort out. It should not affect our ability to get on and make offers to the families.

We are driving the matter forward as fast as possible. We have made an offer of interim payments, but I am afraid that the legal representatives of some of the families have turned their faces against that. However, we will do everything we can to reach a settlement as soon as possible. We accepted responsibility a long time ago, and we do not demur from that in any way.

Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): The Defence Secretary called the Haddon-Cave report "a tough read", and it certainly was, describing as it did the tragic and avoidable deaths of 14 of our personnel. It was a damning indictment of procedures in the Ministry of Defence and in industrial partner companies, so I welcome the tone of the right hon. Gentleman's response, both seven weeks ago and again today.

At the centre of what the Defence Secretary announced today, I particularly welcome the formation of the new military aviation authority. He described the authority as independent, but it is obvious that the safety of particular aircraft will differ according to the theatres in which they operate. The right hon. Gentleman has refined the Haddon-Cave recommendations on precise release to service, but will he say whether the MAA will have personnel on the spot in theatre at all times? Will he guarantee that there will be enough of them, and at a senior enough level, to be able to retain their independence and not get swept up into the emergency of a particular situation?

Will the Secretary of State also assure us that the new arrangements will be more responsive and attentive to feedback from the crews of particular aircraft than has sometimes been the case in the past?

The report was scathing about the two companies involved. Industrial partners are important to us, and I welcome the steps that the Defence Secretary said that the two companies were taking, but will he tell the House whether they will step up to the plate and share with the Ministry of Defence both the responsibility and the liability that emerge from this tragic event?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there was a glaring risk to this aircraft that went undiscovered by many experts over 30 years. Most particularly, however, it was not discovered during the safety case that was supposedly put together to identify exactly such risks, but which failed so to do.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the appropriate level of authority on release to service, and we have spent a lot of time over the last seven weeks trying to

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

talk about that. As the hon. Member for Woodspring said, in the military environment we need to make absolutely certain that authority lies in the right place. I do not want to remove that authority: the release to service will be vested in the appropriate level of the chain of command, but we will also make sure that no one lower than that will take operational risk. Therefore, if operational circumstances demand that a particular platform ought to be allowed to fly, that level of release will be needed before any such course of action can be taken. In addition, the MAA will have the authority to oversee and audit all the decisions that are taken.

The reason why Mr. Haddon-Cave wanted to make sure that these matters were led at the appropriate level was to ensure the kind of authority and independence that the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) is looking for. That is why we are saying that three-star officer level is appropriate.

That structure might change in time. We may well find that bringing other parts of MOD safety within such a construct is the right thing to do, in which case the authority would broaden to cover other areas. However, for the initial period while we are setting up the MAA, the focus needs to be on aviation safety, and the organisation needs to be led at the appropriate level.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the characteristically frank and candid manner in which he addressed the House, which is appreciated. Will he assure the House that an independent military aviation authority will have full access to any information that it requires to do a comprehensive job, and that it will be truly independent so that it can make any comments or criticism that it considers necessary in the interests of our service personnel, without pressure on it for financial or political considerations?

Mr. Ainsworth: That is precisely what we are trying to achieve. I hope that my hon. Friend understands—I have heard this, understandably, from the families who have lost their loved ones—that the independent military aviation authority should be outside the Ministry of Defence, with the Civil Aviation Authority playing its role. We cannot bring a civilian authority into the military environment, so what we are trying to do, and what Haddon-Cave recommended, because he saw that that was not the way forward and did not recommend it, is to mirror the level of authority in the CAA but with people who recognise the military environment. Of course, we must monitor their performance to ensure that they are doing their job appropriately over time and that they have the independence that my hon. Friend wants.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): Is not the most difficult thing to change the culture of the Ministry of Defence, away from ticking boxes? How do we do that?

Mr. Ainsworth: There are still changes that need to be made and we still have a way to go, but in the two and a half years that I have been in the Ministry of Defence, during which I have dealt with many boards of inquiry, inquests and deaths of service personnel, I have already seen a change of culture. There are areas where it does not reach, but there is a desire to make sure that the right culture exists. We have made progress over time. The pressure to which the Department has been subjected from the level of scrutiny required by inquests and the new service inquiries has put that in a better place. It still is not right; it still needs to be driven. There is more, and the MAA will be a major tool in ensuring that that happens.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that, since this tough report was published, morale among those involved has taken a considerable knock. Does he agree that it is imperative that we acknowledge that, as well as the uniformed work force, there are thousands in the civilian work force throughout the country, including more than 2,000 in Boscombe Down in my constituency alone, who work for QinetiQ, whose reach goes from Boscombe Down to Benbecula, and who support our uniformed military personnel every day? Does he agree that we must ensure that they regain the trust and confidence of Her Majesty's forces? Will he tell us where the headquarters of the military aviation authority will be and where the 250 military personnel will come from?

Mr. Ainsworth: I accept that there is a point in what the hon. Gentleman says. When people and the Department are criticised to the degree that they were in the report, that is bound to worry even dedicated people who are trying to do their job. Equally, there is well founded evidence from up and down the ranks of our employees that they want to make sure that we learn all the lessons as well. They are not just feeling the crush and the pressure of the criticism. In many cases they are urging us to put systems in place that make sure that we are as effective as we can be. They know that they are part of the system and they take huge pride in the work that they do. We have not decided a location yet. Haddon-Cave wants to make sure that we have a separate location. It will take time to put the team together and allocate appropriate premises to them.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Will the MAA, rather like the CAA, have responsibility not only for airworthiness, but for safety on the ground and at air bases? Is it not time that we had an independent military air accident investigation board?

Mr. Ainsworth: I will write to the hon. Gentleman on the detail. I want the MAA to be able to take a complete overview and audit all aspects of air safety. I will write to clarify the detail.

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): Just yesterday I and a cross-party group of MPs met the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), to discuss the future of the Nimrod project. There are still 1,000-plus skilled workers at Woodford in my constituency building the new generation of Nimrod aircraft. What message does the Secretary of State have today for those loyal and dedicated workers who stand to lose their jobs when the current Nimrod project is completed?

Mr. Ainsworth: The decisions that I announced yesterday and those that the Minister was talking to the hon. Gentleman's group about were not connected to the Haddon-Cave review, as I tried to make clear yesterday. They related to prioritisation issues and budgetary measures within the MOD. Mr. Haddon-Cave was very clear. We asked that if, at any point in the course of his investigation, he found reason to question the airworthiness of planes currently flying, he should come to us immediately. He did not do that. He says that in his report, and he says that the Nimrod is now the most scrutinised military aircraft flying anywhere in the world. We still need the capabilities of many of the Nimrod variations. *[Interruption.]* We still need other variations of the Nimrod and we will need to look carefully at how we use that aircraft in the future. We will do so during a strategic defence review.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome the Haddon-Cave report and I commend the Secretary of State's response to its findings, but will he confirm that he has had independent, third party representations from people who are concerned about one or two of the report's more subjective findings on individuals in the command chain, where conclusions appear to have been drawn without substantial evidence? I do not wish to tempt him to comment on any investigations in progress, but can he say anything about that part of the report and will he undertake to give those individuals a fair hearing at some stage during the investigation?

Mr. Ainsworth: I have had representations, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I hope that he understands that, for the reason that I mentioned in my statement, I do not want to say anything about any of the individuals. Two are still current employees who are undergoing investigation. It would be wrong for me to go into that matter.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and prior sight of it. Today we pay tribute to the 14 service personnel who died aboard Nimrod XV230 and to their families. We hope that no more loved ones will have to go through the same sort of tragedy.

We will look closely at the MOD's detailed response. It is important to recognise the personnel at RAF Kinloss who have worked extremely hard to maintain the safety of the ageing Nimrod fleet, as well as the wider community in Moray who give such great support. There are many lessons to be learned from the Haddon-Cave report, as well as from the treatment of the families, which left a lot to be desired. I welcome the creation of the military aviation authority, but we should not lose sight of the fact that the report criticised

"a shift in culture and priorities in the MOD towards 'business' and financial targets, at the expense of functional values such as safety and airworthiness".

Given this week's military cuts and the continuing defence privatisation agenda, how could the MOD even begin to claim that it will get to grips with the deep-seated failed culture that led to the loss of Nimrod XV230?

Mr. Ainsworth: I pay tribute not only to those whose lives were lost on that XV230, but to the rest of the crews and servicemen who keep and have kept such planes flying for a long time. I pay tribute also to the families, whom I have met on more than one occasion. Yes, of course there is anguish and grief, but there has been a determination on their part—a laudable determination—to drive us to learn the lessons so that the loss of their loved ones is not in vain and we get to a better place in our systems and safety capability. They are to be applauded for that.

On the criticisms that were made, there is no doubt that in this area aviation safety suffered. None of us can say—I do not believe that any proper reading of Haddon-Cave says—that we should not be driving for efficiency. Everybody wants an efficient service, and everybody wants to make sure that we are at the cutting edge in our methods as well as in the equipment that we fly. But safety cannot be compromised in that regard.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for bringing these sensitive and difficult issues to the House for scrutiny, for his tributes and for his honest and caring approach, which the whole House recognises. However, will he confirm, given that he has not yet done so, that the resources required to set up the MAA will not be drawn from front-line services, and that they will be new resources?

Mr. Ainsworth: Many of the responsibilities already exist within various parts of the Ministry of Defence, but they really need to be brought together, given authority and leadership and, therefore, put in a position to make sure that the lessons we need badly to learn are learned. The resources will be ours, but many of them already exist in various other places, and we need to bring them together in the way that Mr. Haddon-Cave has suggested.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): We all acknowledge that no review or reaction to such will be able to bring back the 14 service personnel whose lives were lost. Nor can we remove the pain that their families have suffered. However, will the Secretary of State assure the House that no aircraft will be allowed to fly, and no other equipment will be used, that endangers our servicemen and women whether they be in theatre or preparing for theatre.

Mr. Ainsworth: That should not happen—it should not be happening now. There are lots and lots of dedicated people in the RAF, the Army and the Navy and in our civilian staff at the Ministry of Defence whose responsibility it is—and they take it very seriously—to see exactly that that does not happen. However, the complexity and the lack of accountability—the things that were identified in the report—could undermine the best of individuals who are trying to do the job that we give them to do. So bringing out this matter, giving clear lines of accountability and establishing the authority ought to put our own people in a place where they can work more effectively for the safety of the people for whom we have responsibility.

Point of Order

1.13 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Further to my point of order on 12 November 2008 to Speaker Martin, my subsequent point of order on 12 November this year to your good self, Sir, and my general comments and remarks over the eight and a half years that I have been a Member regarding the flying of the Union flag—the flag of our country—from the flagpoles on the parliamentary estate, will you now give a progress report and explain what is going to happen in the future on this matter?

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) for his point of order and, indeed, for giving me advance notice of it, and I am very happy to provide the progress report that he seeks. He should be aware and the House is now informed that the Chair of the Administration Committee wrote to me on 25 November to inform me that

"the Administration Committee considered a paper from the Parliamentary Director of Estates on flag flying on the Parliamentary Estate."

Following a discussion of this important matter, the Committee agreed to recommend to me that

"flags should be flown on all three flagpoles on the Estate every day of the year, taking account of the usual ceremonial occasions."

The Chair of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran), helpfully pointed out to me in the letter:

"This would bring Parliament into line with other Whitehall departments. In the case of the Victoria Tower, agreement would be necessary with the House of Lords."

I wrote back to the hon. Gentleman on 30 November, agreeing to his recommendations, including those relating to shape, dimensions and a change to "three by five", which I know will be of close interest to the House.

I hope that the hon. Member for Romford feels a proper sense of triumph at what he has achieved in this matter, which he has, as he indicated, pursued over a lengthy period with, if I may say, a tenacity reminiscent of a Staffordshire bull terrier.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Consolidated Fund Act 2009.

BILLS PRESENTED

Mortgage Repossessions (Protection of Tenants Etc.) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr. Brian Iddon, supported by Rob Marris, Mr. Neil Gerrard, John Austin, Chris McCafferty, Mr. Andrew Dismore, Mr. David Curry, Peter Bottomley, Mr. Edward Leigh, Mr. Phil Willis, Bob Russell and Paul Holmes, presented a Bill to protect persons whose tenancies are not binding on mortgagees and to require mortgagees to give notice of the proposed execution of possession orders.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 15).

Local Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. David Chaytor, supported by Mr. David S. Borrow, Mr. David Crausby, Mr. David Drew, Dr. Brian Iddon, Mr. Paul Truswell, Mark Fisher, Mr. Michael Clapham, Helen Southworth, Mrs. Betty Williams, Fiona Mactaggart and Joan Walley, presented a Bill to make further provision about the functions, powers and constitution of local authority overview and scrutiny committees; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February, and to be printed (Bill 16).

Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Andrew Gwynne, supported by Ms Sally Keeble, Anne Snelgrove, Mr. David Drew, Sir Gerald Kaufman, Mr. Andy Reed, Hilary Armstrong, Mr. Peter Lilley, Peter Bottomley, Anne Main, Andrew Stunell and Tom Brake, presented a Bill to make provision for or in connection with the relief of debts of certain developing countries.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed (Bill 17).

Grocery Market Ombudsman Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Albert Owen, supported by Andrew George, Nick Ainger, Mr. David Drew, Mark Durkan, Daniel Kawczynski, Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, Peter Bottomley, Mark Williams, Alun Michael, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle and Dr. Hywel Francis, presented a Bill to make provision for the appointment, functions and powers of a Grocery Market Ombudsman; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed (Bill 18).

Sunbeds (Regulation) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Julie Morgan, supported by Mrs. Siân C. James, Mr. Kevin Barron, Mrs. Betty Williams, Frank Dobson, Jessica Morden, Rosie Cooper, Dr. Evan Harris, Sandra Gidley, Mr. John Baron, Miss Julie Kirkbride and Dr. Richard Taylor, presented a Bill to make provision about the use or supply of tanning devices that use artificial ultra-violet radiation; and for connected purposes.

Blll read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 19).

Anti-slavery Day Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Anthony Steen, supported by Clare Short, Sir Michael Spicer, Michael Connarty, Sir Paul Beresford, Dr. Evan Harris, Keith Vaz, Mr. Peter Bone and Mr. Andrew Dismore, Mr. Peter Luff, Mr. Angus Robertson and Lady Sylvia Hermon, presented a Bill to introduce a national day to raise awareness of the need to eradicate all forms of slavery, human trafficking and exploitation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February, and to be printed (Bill 20).

Sustainable Communities Act 2007 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Alistair Burt, supported by Mr. David Drew, Mr. Andrew Dismore, Mr. Martin Caton, Joan Walley, Dr. Brian Iddon, Tom Levitt, Julia Goldsworthy, Mr. Oliver Heald, Robert Neill and Mr. Nick Hurd, presented a Bill to amend the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 to make provision regarding town and parish councils, local decision-making and expenditure and the consideration of proposals; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed (Bill 21).

Warsaw Convention (Carrier Liability) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Smith, supported by John Barrett, Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, Mr. Martyn Jones, Jim Sheridan, Mr. Desmond Swayne, Sir Nicholas Winterton, Mr. Brian Jenkins and Dr. Richard Taylor, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to propose amendments to Article 17 of the Warsaw Convention for the purpose of extending carrier liability to cases of detriment to health or psychological well-being; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed (Bill 22).

Safety and Conservation (Byelaws) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Crispin Blunt, on behalf of Chris Grayling, presented a Bill to empower the Secretary of State to delegate certain powers in respect of safety and conservation to conservators and other specified bodies; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 April, and to be printed (Bill 23).

Lisbon Treaty (Referendum) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Nigel Dodds, supported by Mr. Peter Robinson, Mr. William Cash, Mr. Ian Davidson, Mr. Mike Hancock, Lady Sylvia Hermon, Kate Hoey, Kelvin Hopkins, Dr. William McCrea, Bob Spink, Ann Winterton and Sir Nicholas Winterton, presented a Bill to require the holding of a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon and to require the repeal of the European Union (Amendment) Act 2008 if the decision to ratify is not approved in the referendum; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed (Bill 24).

National Health Service Public Interest Disclosure Support Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr. Richard Taylor, supported by Mr. Kevin Barron, Mr. Graham Brady, Mr. William Cash, Mr. Dai Davies, Frank Dobson, Sandra Gidley, Patrick Hall, Dr. Doug Naysmith, Mr. Robert N. Wareing and Dr. Tony Wright, presented a Bill to make provision for the appointment, functions and powers of independent Support Officers for NHS employees who wish to make certain disclosures in the public interest; to place a duty on NHS trusts and others to co-operate with such Support Officers; to make consequential amendments to the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed (Bill 25).

Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Simon Hughes, supported by Lorely Burt, Tim Farron, Lynne Featherstone, Nick Harvey, John Hemming, Paul Holmes, Mr. John Leech, Mr. Adrian Sanders, Andrew Stunell, Stephen Williams and Jenny Willott, presented a Bill to amend the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to enable local planning authorities to use sums received under section 106 of the Act for the building and improvement of housing; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 26).

Care Homes and Sheltered Accommodation (Domestic Pets) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Nigel Waterson, supported by Miss Ann Widdecombe, Andrew Rosindell, Mr. Roger Gale, Paul Flynn, Mr. James Gray, Mr. Denis MacShane, Dr. Nick Palmer and Ann Clwyd, presented a Bill to make provision for residents of care homes and sheltered accommodation to keep domestic pets in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed (Bill 27).

European Union Membership (Referendum) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Douglas Carswell, supported by Philip Davies, Mr. Philip Hollobone, Mr. Peter Bone, Mr Austin Mitchell, Mr. Mike Hancock, Dr. Evan Harris, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Kelvin Hopkins and Ann Winterton, presented a Bill to require the holding of a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed (Bill 28).

Development on Flood Plains (Environment Agency Powers) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bob Spink presented a Bill to empower the Environment Agency to prevent development on flood plains to which the Agency objects; to require planning authorities

to comply with Environment Agency advice when considering development on flood plains; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 29).

Local Government (Infrastructure Requirement Plans) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Mark Hoban, supported by Mr. Mark Francois, Mr. Mark Prisk, Mr. Paul Goodman, Mr. David Gauke, Mr. Brooks Newmark, Mrs Maria Miller, John Howell and Mr. Charles Walker, presented a Bill to require local authorities to assess the infrastructure needed to support future housing and commercial development and to prepare plans for its provision; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed (Bill 30).

Marine Accident Investigation Branch (Reports) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

David Cairns presented a Bill to make provision to oblige shipping companies, port operators and other bodies to comply with recommendations made in reports of the Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents and of the Marine Accident Investigation Branch; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed (Bill 31).

School Transport Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. David Heath presented a Bill to make provision for a dedicated school bus network; to amend the duties of Local Education Authorities to provide school transport; to improve the safety of users of school transport; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 32).

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. We have just heard a lot of hon. Members presenting private Members' Bills and, with the exception of the last Member, giving dates for Second Reading when the House has not yet been given any dates when Second Readings are to be available. How can that be in order? How can Members know that they will actually be able to debate their business on that day?

Mr. Speaker: That is a matter for the Government, as I think the hon. Gentleman knows. I think it would be accurate to say that he is engaged in a continuing altercation with the Government on this important matter. Once again, he has taken the opportunity to register firmly on the record his disapproval of the Government's handling of the matter.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is not the fact that the consideration of private Members' Bills is a matter for the Government rather than the House an illustration of why we need an early debate on the proposals from the Wright Committee?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is taking the opportunity to instigate a debate. As he knows, I have myself indicated on previous occasions a desire that the matters to which he has referred should come before the House before very long. After the festive season, I have no reason to suppose that he will be disappointed.

If there are no further points of order—I know the House is in a very "point of order" mood—we now come to the main business.

Christmas Adjournment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Blizzard.)*

Mr. Speaker: As hon. Members will probably be aware, I have imposed a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

1.23 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): I want to raise a matter concerning work that is being undertaken on parts of the M6 motorway in my constituency. I am doing so because I am very disappointed that the Highways Agency has not shown proper regard and consideration for my constituents, whose properties are virtually next to the motorway. Graham Dalton, the chief executive of the Highways Agency, which has authorised the work through the Department for Transport, has now, at long last, visited the borough, some nine months after the work started. Obviously, I expected that he would take the opportunity to visit my constituents, who have been so adversely affected. He knows the position, because during the past nine months I have written to him and faxed letters, sometimes twice or three times a week. Yes, there have been replies, but there has been a reluctance on his part to come and see what is happening.

Another reason for raising this issue on the Floor of the House is that the residents were given no proper notification that the work was going to take place. That is accepted by the agency, which says that it was a mistake. All that happened was that some advertisements were placed in the regional press that residents were unlikely to see. Why were they not told beforehand that the work was going to take place? It is pretty obvious why not—it is because they would have put forward proposals to try to safeguard their position during the various stages of the work. The public liaison officer for the contractors carrying out the work for the Highways Agency has admitted that a mistake was made in not letting people know about this beforehand. He said, interestingly, that nowhere else had they come across properties so close to the carriageway, and obviously they should know because they do a lot of work on motorway construction and repairs.

Hundreds of trees were taken down that had previously acted as a kind of barrier to the motorway, minimising noise and giving some protection for properties that were built before the motorway came into existence some years ago. Since then, the noise has been unbearable. We can only imagine the position of someone who lives just by the motorway where trees and other measures that provided some sort of protection have been taken away. They have to live through it, sometimes during the night as well. I have sent several letters urging that at least night work should not take place, and to some extent that has stopped, but not entirely. That is the nightmare situation—there is no other way to describe it—that several of my constituents have faced during the course of this year.

In April, the chief executive of the Highways Agency wrote to tell me that he admitted that this was wrong and that a public meeting, or "exhibition", as it is described, had not taken place to explain the scheme beforehand. That comes rather late in the day. The work is started without direct notification to the people concerned, and then, when it is under way and the Member of Parliament undertakes his duties, as anyone else in this House would have done, there is an admission from the chief executive that a public meeting should have been held in the first place. If such a meeting had taken place, the residents would have had their say.

In March, after considerable difficulty, I managed to get an on-site meeting. It is almost impossible to appreciate how difficult that was. The situation involves the publicly funded Highways Agency, the private contractors and the rest, but the Highways Agency, in particular, gave me all kinds of reasons why it would not meet me on the site itself. It was happy to have a meeting with a Member of Parliament, but why should it not be an on-site meeting? It was only as a result of an intervention by the relevant Minister's private office that finally, in March, an on-site meeting took place, which councillors and I went along to. It took a great deal of trouble and effort to get that meeting going.

In the past few weeks, Mr. Dalton, the chief executive of the Highways Agency, told me that he was going to visit the borough. Excellent news—at long last he was going to visit. Then, last week, I got a phone call from his office asking if I would arrange a meeting with him. I said, "We will be meeting, will we not, on the site where the work is taking place?" "Oh no", I was told, "that can't happen. It will be a very brief visit. It's going to take place this coming Monday"—that is, two days ago. So at long last, the chief executive of the Highways Agency decides to come and visit to see what is happening with the work on the motorway—but as for meeting the residents, that is out of the question. The visit must be brief—he is too busy and cannot spare the time. What about my constituents, who have suffered such a nightmare? "Oh well, too bad," seemed to be the attitude. He was willing to meet me and wanted to make an appointment as quickly as possible, but what about meeting my constituents? Hence I decided that it would be right to raise the issue on the Floor of the House. I believe that the action of the Highways Agency has been absolutely despicable. It did not inform the residents beforehand, and for that matter it did not let me know so that I could tell the residents. There was great reluctance even to have the on-site meeting, which finally took place in March, and then the chief executive said that he did not have the time on Monday, when I assume he made a visit, to meet the people concerned.

I have raised the issue and I hope that the Minister will perhaps persuade Mr. Dalton accordingly. I have no criticism of the private office of the Secretary of State for Transport, because there was the on-site meeting in March, which I mentioned, in my constituency arising from all this, which I imagine was due to his intervention. Last week's effort by his private office and civil servants to persuade Mr. Dalton to change his mind came to nothing.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Barbara Keeley): My hon. Friend should know that he could not be talking to a more sympathetic person, because I am currently struggling in my own constituency with the M60 junction 11 to 15 lane gain. I hope to give him a very sympathetic response later.

Mr. Winnick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Incidentally, it is interesting that Mr. Dalton said that the on-site meeting in March was "helpful and positive".

[Mr. Winnick]

If it was helpful and positive in March for one of the more junior officials to attend a meeting—perhaps not all that junior, but certainly junior to the chief executive or deputy chief executive—why would not a meeting with the chief executive himself be helpful and positive? The chief executive was not willing to turn up at the meeting in March, and one of his officials got the short straw.

All in all, I hope that Ministers at the Department for Transport will pursue the matter. It could be argued that the chief executive of the Highways Agency has no role in meeting the public, but I argue that in such situations as the M6 work in my constituency and the work that my hon. Friend the Minister described, the chief executive has not acted properly. I am sure that he is an honourable person and does his duties efficiently. I do not question that in any way, but he has been insensitive, to say the least, to the plight of my constituents. That is why I have raised the issue on the Floor of the House.

1.32 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I shall follow the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) in making a number of local points. That is the nature of these debates, which provide an opportunity to raise with the Minister some issues that constituents have brought to my attention.

I start with an education issue: the role that Ofsted has played in discharging its inspection responsibilities. Earlier this year it undertook an inspection of Robin Hood junior school in my constituency and rather used it as a guinea pig for a test run of its new inspection regime and a new inspector. The inspectors' conclusions match neither the school's view of itself nor the view of the local education authority and particularly the executive head responsible for school improvement. There has been unprecedented unanimity of view that the inspectors' conduct and review have led to a judgment that is false and damaging to the school.

When the inspectors came to the school, they seemed to have a predetermined view about what was going on there. That was an incomplete picture based on a partial reading of the data that were available about the school's educational performance. They proceeded very selectively to gather evidence that seemed to reinforce the hypothesis that they had already arrived at, disregarding evidence that would in any way contradict it. The inspectors took just one year's data to form a view and projected that to conclude that there was widespread underachievement in the school. That was not true and is not fair, and the data do not support that conclusion. The inspectors seemed wilfully to overlook positive achievements while they were in the school, and by taking just one-year's data rather than the normal three-year average, they misled themselves, and could mislead parents who are deciding whether to send their children to that school. I would argue that, in some ways, they misdirected themselves in how they conducted the inspection.

There is an appeal process to challenge Ofsted judgments and how inspectors have come to their conclusions, and it has been used to challenge the judgment in that case. However, from my direct experience of the process so far and discussions with the head teacher, I do not believe that it is a robust and independent process of checking whether the inspector has done the job properly. So far in the appeal process, points that I, the school and the local authority have raised have been disregarded. The inspectors' version of events seems to have been accepted without question, and when alternative points of view are put forward they seem to be set aside if the inspectors' notes do not include any evidence of them. That does not seem to be in any way fair or natural justice.

I finally wrote a letter to the chief inspector on behalf of the school and others. She has not replied to it herself, but in the reply that I have received, many of the questions that I posed were not answered by Ofsted. It was little more than a cut-and-paste version of the reply that was sent to the head teacher, who asked a number of questions that were similar but not completely the same.

I ask the Minister: where is the accountability, quality control and robust independent complaints procedure, and how can we accept a situation in which damage can be done to a school's reputation by a rogue Ofsted report? I am concerned that the school could be done harm by the process. I have been delighted by how the school and parents have worked together and by the fact that the school has reassured parents, not least because it has been so robustly supported by the local education authority. I hope that justice will be done in the new year and that there will be some serious engagement by Ofsted in that serious problem.

The second matter that I wish to raise was mentioned by the Leader of the House in Prime Minister's questions today. She referred to the need for credit unions to deal with the pressures that come from loan sharks. I have been supporting the efforts of the London borough of Sutton to set up a credit union to promote a culture of savings and offer secure low-cost loans. The route that the borough chose was to extend an existing credit union from the London borough of Croydon to cover both Sutton and Merton as well. That would cost less than other options and could be done more quickly.

Just last week, on 2 December, we learned that the application to extend the common bond to permit the Croydon Savers Union to operate in Sutton and Merton had been rejected. It would seem that it ticked all the boxes except one—it did not meet the locality rule that currently applies. The view of the Financial Services Authority was that although Sutton, Merton and Croydon share borders, they are not a sufficiently clear and coherent locality to warrant ticking that box. I suspect that many hon. Members will accept that, when administrative boundaries are drawn, the areas that fall within them are not automatically and always seen as a common locality. When it comes to finding a cost-effective way of extending the benefits of a credit union, it seems rather strange that that one rule is becoming such a barrier.

We have been told that changes to the rules that are due to come in by next July mean that the credit union will be able to go ahead then. However, I hope that the Minister will pass on to colleagues in the Treasury my view that hard-pressed families who are struggling under a burden of debt and financial pressures of one sort or another would benefit from a credit union as soon as possible. I hope that something can be done to ensure that one comes to Sutton sooner rather than later.

Decent council homes are a concern for many of my constituents, not just those who live in them but those who work in them to make them decent. It was a real blow to hear the announcement in July that the Government were to switch resources out of the decent homes programme and into the building of new council homes. One can understand the case for investment in new homes, but that should not in any way undermine the absolute need to ensure that existing properties are properly maintained, renovated and improved. A devastating blow has been dealt to tenants, and to the staff who have been working so hard to ensure that they get a two-star rating through the assessment, and that the programmes to meet the need are in place.

That money would have been used to replace a number of things, including life-expired, asbestos-ridden box bathrooms that are literally coming away from the sides of the properties to which they were attached 40 years ago, and electrical and plumbing works. New boilers and home insulation will go a long way to help to tackle fuel poverty in my constituency. Given that the stock condition has been put in the bottom quartile of London councils, the decent homes programme is much needed in my area.

A team has been set up to do all that work, but they are now at risk of being sacked, because the work will not be available to them. The contractors who have been lined up, who would have employed 27 new apprentices, are also now having to be stood down. We need that £120 million programme, to lift the standard of living of many of my constituents. I had a very successful and useful meeting just last week with the Minister for Housing and local tenants leaders, who made a very powerful case. The talks were productive. I certainly hope that the Minister will reflect on the matter over the Christmas period and that we will have a change of heart so that that resource becomes available.

I have spoken in the House on a number of occasions about Sri Lanka. The Tamil community in my constituency is concerned about relatives and others given what is happening in the country. I shall address only one issue today—the camps—and I hope that Foreign Office Ministers will continue to pursue it vigorously. The camps are seen by many Tamils as detention camps. People are not allowed free movement and certainly not to go home. There is a lack of information about who is being detained and why, and a lack of access for independent human rights and humanitarian agencies. Twelve thousand alleged Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam members are held in them without access to those agencies or even the Red Cross. They have now been incarcerated for seven months without any form of charge and certainly without any promise of being released.

The Government are doing much to put pressure on the Sri Lankan Government to honour their commitments on international law and human rights, but can more be done to ensure that, through the European Union, where we have leverage and which has recently reported on human rights violations, the renewal of the generalised system of preferences plus does not happen? That would be a way of signalling to the Sri Lankan Government that they must strive more to ensure that Tamils are treated fairly and equally in that country, and that there is a genuine process of restoring trust and building peace, rather than continued intimidation of, and misery for, many Tamils.

I end where I began—with education. There has been a 29.4 per cent. rise in births in my borough since 2001, which means that an additional 300 children per year will turn up at reception classes across Sutton. Indeed, in the past three years, there has been a 21 per cent. increase in Sutton and a 24 per cent. increase in Worcester Park in my constituency. Based on those figures and other data, there is a need, I believe, for anything between 170 and 200 more places in September of 2011 and over 300 more by 2012.

Despite having the largest birth rate increases in London and the lowest numbers of surplus places nationally, Sutton has recently been told that it will receive nothing of the £271 million that has been allocated by the Department for Children, Schools and Families as a safety valve to help to cope with such unexpected and increasing pressures. It therefore has to find up to £18 million itself to fund the additional accommodation that will be needed to ensure that those children have a school place to go to. The real concern now is that the accommodation will not be of the right sort—temporary accommodation—and that schools, governors, head teachers and others will understandably object to it, thus causing even more delays in delivery. I have been trying to get a response to an e-mail that I sent to the Minister for Schools and Learners to arrange a meeting to discuss my local education authority's concerns and its case for additional funding, but I have not yet had one. I would like the opportunity to meet the Minister in the new year to see whether we can find a way through the funding problem.

In conclusion, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr. Speaker, the staff of individual Members of Parliament and those who work in the service of the House, the compliments of the season. I am sure that we all look forward to a very prosperous and successful new year.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. May I just remind hon. Members that Mr. Speaker has imposed a 15-minute time limit on Back-Bench contributions?

1.45 pm

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure Members on both sides of the House will be hoping for a positive outcome from the Copenhagen meeting as it draws toward a close. It is vital that an agreement is reached that will commit the countries of the world to work seriously together to tackle this international problem. During the summer I led a small Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to study the effects of climate change on some of the smallest countries in the world. The group visited Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu and Tuvalu in the south Pacific, which have populations ranging from 11,000 to just over 200,000.

We heard from many people about how the effects of climate change are making their daily lives much more difficult. The Pacific islands are relatively poor, and the local people lack the resources to cope well with the extreme weather that is becoming more frequent. Some

[Meg Munn]

were angry that they suffer the effects of increased greenhouse gas emissions having contributed virtually none themselves.

Most people imagine that rising sea levels lead to low-lying islands disappearing under water, causing local populations to relocate, but local inhabitants move long before that happens. Already in Vanuatu, the population of one small island has had to do so.

High tides and rising sea water contaminate the drinking water, meaning that the only option for populations is to collect rain water to drink. On Funafuti, the main island of Tuvalu, the local council told us that owing to low rainfall, families are currently rationed to six buckets of water each morning and evening. Although the European Union has been able to help with the provision of large rain water collection tanks on the main island, as yet no means have been found to transport similar tanks to the outer islands. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that representatives from Tuvalu have made themselves heard at the summit in Copenhagen.

Over time the land becomes saturated with salty water, making it impossible to grow food. At the moment, around 70 to 80 per cent. of the people on those islands are reliant on agriculture. We heard in Tuvalu that the island now frequently experiences high tides that lead to flooding. How can a small farmer keep animals or sow crops when fertile soils and fresh water are contaminated with salt water?

Pressure will grow for the larger countries in the Pacific to take in climate change refugees. The reality is that no Pacific nation will be unaffected, no matter how large. More than half the population of the islands of the region lives within 1.5 km of the shore. We were shown maps that showed that within 20 years, the heavily populated areas of many countries will be uninhabitable.

The visit brought it home to the delegation that climate change is having a profound impact now, and that the prospects for the people of the region are poor. Whatever the result of the Copenhagen discussions, I think it important that we in the UK continue to take what action we can to tackle the problem.

All Pacific island nations have drawn up national adaptation plans with the support of funds from the United Nations, but we were told that the lack resources to implement the plans causes those nations a great deal of concern. Climate change experts at the university of the South Pacific were clear that without significant adaptation now, the longer-term prospects for the countries are bleak.

Earlier this week, I asked the Prime Minister whether European Union money that has been allocated for assistance can be made available for adaptation. In his response he clearly recognised the importance of taking action. For many people in the world climate change is not an issue for the future: it is affecting them now.

In the UK we are lucky not to face such immediate problems. However, we do have a responsibility to reduce our carbon emissions to mitigate the future effects of climate change. I believe strongly that by focusing more on energy efficiency we could begin to see dramatic reductions. Houses in the UK are responsible for a significant amount of carbon emissions. While there are many aspects to this which could and should be addressed, I particularly want to address the matter of heating and electricity.

I commend the Government for announcing a boiler scrappage scheme in the pre-Budget report last week. Around 125,000 households will be able to upgrade their boiler when the scheme starts early next year. I hope that we can allocate further funds in due course as part of a rolling programme to replace the large number of old and inefficient boilers in use. The Chancellor said:

"Inefficient domestic boilers add over £200 to household bills and 1 tonne of carbon to the atmosphere each year."—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 365.]

That scheme will be a positive step in reducing household emissions. It has an added attraction in that it will bring down the average household energy bill, which will be especially important to those caught in the fuel poverty trap.

It is important that we have financial incentives in place to encourage the next generation of low-carbon and renewable electricity. I know that the Government have been consulting on two mechanisms: the renewables obligation and feed-in tariffs. I want to concentrate today on feed-in tariffs: the money paid for electricity supplied to the national grid. I think that we can make more progress. The Renewable Energy Association states that the Government are planning to meet just 2 per cent. of the UK's electricity needs from technologies supported through the current tariff scheme. That figure is far lower than the potential and considerably lower than other countries are achieving or working toward.

If we pay more attention to that aspect of electricity production, we can encourage many more individual households and small businesses to become involved. The expansion of small-scale electricity production would help us in tackling climate change. It would also encourage technological innovation, followed in due course by the manufacture of the newly designed equipment.

Around the world, tariff schemes have had positive effects on cutting costs of renewable technologies, as well as creating employment opportunities. They offer an incentive for individuals and companies, particularly those already focused on products aimed at low carbon emissions. I understand that the proposed clean energy cash back tariff, scheduled to launch in April, will pay households which generate their own power from wind turbines and solar panels. They will receive money for each unit of electricity that they use in their own home, and also for the surplus energy that they provide to their local energy company. Both payments will be tax free.

I know that the Government's consultation on renewable electricity financial incentives is now closed, and they have yet to issue their response. I hope that they will seriously consider increasing the proposed level of tariffs. The suggested return on investment of between 5 per cent. and 8 per cent. is not likely to be sufficient to encourage significant take-up. According to the modelling commissioned by the Department for Energy and Climate Change, tariffs that deliver a 10 per cent. return on investment would result in three times the amount of renewable electricity generation by 2020 than will be delivered by the proposed scheme.

Over the past few months, I have been working closely with one small Sheffield company in this field, Disenco Energy plc. It is close to the commercial production

of the first viable micro combined heat and power appliance suitable for the domestic and commercial market. Currently the size of a washing machine, Disenco's patented HomePowerPlan is a highly efficient boiler and a 3 KW electrical system at 92 per cent. efficiency. That appliance will supply all the hot water and heating requirements of a home, and up to 70 per cent. of its electricity needs at peak times. That is obviously beneficial for the consumer as costs and efficiency savings result in reductions to annual electrical bills. Importantly, it can cut the carbon footprint of a home by about 70 per cent., reducing CO_2 emissions.

The product is targeted at the domestic market as a direct replacement for the boiler. The company estimates that the cost could be around £3,000 when production gets into commercial gear. That would put them in the same market as many current new boilers, obviously important when trying to entice people to replace their old boiler with a new energy-efficient appliance.

The other significant benefit of micro combined heat and power units is that they assist with electricity generation at precisely the times when there is significant demand, helping the grid to cope with peak periods. They also make a significant contribution to tackling fuel poverty. Elderly and vulnerable people, who currently hesitate to put the heating on for fear of the cost, will be able to heat their homes, knowing that by doing so they are also generating electricity and being paid for it.

Emerging small businesses such as Disenco need the support that the Government can provide. They need a revenue system in place that provides incentives for householders to replace their old boilers with new products that can generate sufficient electricity that surplus can be sold to the national grid. They also of course need money to get their products to market. At a time when we have supported banks with billions of pounds, a few million pounds of investment could see these important new technologies in place in months.

We face the challenge of meeting the UK targets of reducing energy use, while at the same time bringing to an end the excessive use of fossil fuels. Feed-in tariffs are one way of helping us to get there. Encouraging change is a huge challenge, particularly so during this difficult economic time. However, the possibilities of these new technologies fill me with optimism. They will reduce carbon emissions, ensure that people can stay warm in their homes, and importantly we will use less of the planet's resources. If we can encourage and help along this process, we can also help to generate future prosperity for the country.

On that note, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, everybody else in the House and all the staff a very happy Christmas and all the best for the new year.

1.57 pm

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I enjoy these end of term Adjournment debates in which we can talk about almost anything, but this will definitely be my last one, as I am retiring. As a result, rather than talk about various local matters, I thought that I would discuss an issue that concerns me, as someone leaving this House after 18 years. I know that those who will be here after the general election intend to make changes to the way in which this House works, especially to the work that Back Benchers do and their power—or perhaps I should say lack of power.

I was shadow Leader of the House when the Government introduced the increase in the use of the guillotine at all stages of a Bill. I opposed it then and, given our experience of that process, I believe that the House and our legislation is the poorer for not having more time—especially in Committee and when a Bill returns from the Lords—for scrutiny and examination on a clause-by-clause, line-by-line basis. It is possible for large chunks of legislation to be added in the other place and, because of the guillotine, to reach the statute book without this House having considered the detail of it at all. That is not democracy or what most of us came into this House to do. I hope that that will be addressed in the reforms that are needed, so that MPs feel that they can play a much more active and influential role in the way in which legislation passes through this place and, as a result, represent their constituents better. Constituents often write to us, but increasingly one finds oneself writing back and saying, "I'm very sorry, but when we got to this on the Floor of the House last night, the guillotine fell and the issues that you have concerns about were not discussed, even though the Speaker might have listed the particular amendments and clauses for debate."

The hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) began the debate by outlining his experience in dealing with the Highways Agency. There, too, something needs to be done. All too often Members of Parliament find themselves unable to stand on the Floor of the House and ask a Minister to respond to a problem in their constituency. Instead they find themselves dealing with quangos, which can be bureaucratic and elusive in responding. That can be extremely time-consuming. If a Minister has ministerial responsibility for a brief, despite all the quangos, many of which I would like to see go, the Minister should be able to give an answer. One should not have to keep phoning a chief executive to get an answer to a local problem.

I would like to flag up my concerns regarding two pieces of paper that were on my desk this morning and which were sent to all Members of Parliament. The first is today's parliamentary ombudsman report entitled, "Cold Comfort: the Administration of the 2005 Single Payment Scheme by the Rural Payments Agency". The House has addressed that matter on many occasions, and I and other members of the Public Accounts Committee have studied it in detail. It is worrying. The ombudsman is an important person to whom Members of Parliament ultimately can take constituency problems for adjudication. Today, however, we see something quite extraordinary. Having looked at case work relating to rural single payments, the ombudsman made recommendations to Parliament, but the Government have not accepted the ombudsman's determination. This is not the first time that has happened—we saw it with Equitable Life, for example, which we debated on the Floor of the House. The letter from the ombudsman reads:

"It is a rare occurrence for the Government to refuse to accept all of the Ombudsman's recommendations in full and for the Government to lay a special report before Parliament on that basis. This report is only the sixth such special report laid before Parliament by the Ombudsman since the creation of the Ombudsman's Office in 1967."

The time has come for the House to exert its power and to say to the Government that when an ombudsman makes a determination, the Government of the day should abide by it, not ignore it.

[Angela Browning]

In slight contrast, I also received from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a handy little pocket guide to the environment containing thousands of statistics. For example, on page 17, I can read about the 2007 EU municipal waste management programme for every country in the EU—fine if one is going on a quiz programme! The same Department that is refusing to accept the ombudsman's determination apparently has the resources to produce these colourful little pocket guides, however useful they might be. I do not know what they cost, but it seems that some of the priorities in some Departments are wrong.

In the 1990s, when I was a Minister at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, a constituent came to me with a complaint about the Ministry. As is the rule for Ministers, I could not consider the matter because he was my constituent; I had to hand it to my colleagues. They considered my constituent's complaint, but eventually the word came back that they did not think that there was a case and would not do whatever it was that my constituent was asking MAFF to do.

I thought about the matter for a nanosecond. I was a Minister in that Ministry because the people of my constituency in Tiverton and Honiton had elected me to represent them in this place. I decided that my duties as a Back-Bench Member of Parliament meant that I should refer my own Department to the parliamentary ombudsman, because I thought that my constituent had a good case. I had an interesting conversation with the permanent secretary. I went to his office and explained to him that I was going to refer MAFF to the parliamentary ombudsman, and he turned a whiter shade of pale. I did it because I thought that my priority was to represent my constituent's interest, whether I was a Minister or a Back Bencher. We should be doing more of that. However, we need the Government to understand that when an ombudsman has a power, it is not for the Government to dismiss it and ignore what the ombudsman says.

Obviously, given that I sit on the Conservative Benches, I have a view on whom I want to form the next Government. I will not be coy: I really hope it will be a Conservative Government. However, in the coming Parliament, after the election, whoever are in government will have a golden opportunity to improve how the House works and to improve the representation of the people through the House, particularly through Back Benchers. I hope that they will reverse many of the things done in recent years and strengthen the powers of those who come to represent their constituents in trying to get results and answers and make life better for them.

Mr. Winnick: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning my remarks. However, does she agree that, apart from the other changes that have taken place—in my view for the better, but time will tell—Westminster Hall debates have given Back Benchers an opportunity that they did not have before? That is an added forum in which issues, whether national or local, can be raised.

Angela Browning: I must say to the hon. Gentleman that, at the time, I was one of the people who were extremely sceptical about how Westminster Hall would function and whether it would be of value. I do believe, however, that he was right and I was wrong. It has been a valuable debating Chamber. It perhaps does not have quite the clout of a debate with a vote in the House, but we would not want to see votes down in Westminster Hall. However, I agree with him. I am not saying that I am opposed to all change or that I am not a moderniser. Some areas of modernisation are good. Equally, however, I would always apply the test of whether they take powers away from Back Benchers and give them to the Executive. Whether we are Government Members or not, we are here to challenge and scrutinise the Executive and to get answers for our constituents. I think that litmus test needs to be applied.

I want to mention something that I raised in an earlier debate. Sometimes, in the House, Members repeatedly make certain points to the Government, but when the relevant policies are put into practice it becomes clear that they have not taken account of the concerns espoused by Members. That is of concern to me. We hear a lot about invitations to stakeholders and Government consultations that never come anywhere near the House when the Government are implementing policies and legislation, particularly in relation to secondary legislation and guidance.

I want to flag up another matter. Over the past couple of years, we have had legislation on disabled people who stop work or lose their jobs because of their disabilities and who then get into the cycle of going back to work. That critical area of returning to work worries me. I have asked the Jobcentre Plus in my constituency for a meeting with the people who assess whether somebody is ready to return to work. I am not necessarily talking about people who have been out of work for many years—the long-term unemployed—because there are different schemes for them. I am more concerned about people who have been out of work because of a serious illness—in particular, cancer—perhaps involving a lot of treatment and surgery, and who, as a result, are quite weak. I am also concerned about people with obvious disabilities.

I have found the recent experiences of some of those people to be quite brutal and cruel—I would use that word—as I have explained to the House before. I saw a lady who had had a lot of chemotherapy and radiography following a double mastectomy. This was her test: she went into the room and they asked her to raise her arms above her head. She could, so they said, "Right, back to work!" Her doctor said that she needed to go back part time and to do it gradually, but they dismissed that. That is why I asked for the meeting.

I have sat through many debates in the House on the need to get people back into work and on what happens when people return to work having been ill. During such debates, hon. Members on both sides of the House have told Ministers that we need to ensure that the assessors have the knowledge, expertise and medical background required to carry out proper assessments, and to ensure that they do not ride roughshod over hospital consultants and general practitioners who clearly know the patient much better than they do. It is not that those people are workshy or shirking; rather, they have had legitimate reasons not to be in work. I intend to follow that point up, but I am concerned that although I have heard it mentioned many times by colleagues across the House, for some reason what should have happened in practice has not happened.

It would not be Christmas or the holiday season if I did not invite colleagues from all parts of the House to come and visit the glorious county of Devon during this three-week recess. They will be made very welcome there. We have the most wonderful entertainment—I can almost hear the log fires crunching away in the background—and lovely food and drink from our wonderful farms. Hon. Members would be made very welcome, and they do not need to rely on British Airways to get to Devon from wherever they live in the country, because we have an excellent airline based in my constituency at Exeter airport called Flybe. It flies from all parts of the country into Exeter. We also have an airport in Plymouth. So I say this to hon. Members: do please come, you will be made very welcome.

I have mentioned BA, so let me conclude with this. My telephone has a ringtone that I know is incredibly irritating to colleagues and which has become known as the BA tune—it is actually "The Flower Duet" from Lakmé. As it is Christmas, I have brought in my phone, in case you felt that you wanted me to hold it up and share the tune with the House, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am at your disposal, although I can see that you are probably not going to let me do that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate the hon. Lady's offer, but even at this time of good will to all, I think that I would have to refuse.

Angela Browning: I rather thought that you might do that, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just thought that people might like to hear the tune, because today is the last time that it will be played on my telephone. I intend to replace it tonight with Rod Stewart's "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?" "The Flower Duet" from Lakmé will not be played on my telephone again.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, all colleagues in the House and all members of staff in the House a very happy and peaceful Christmas?

2.12 pm

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Follow that! Let me reassure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not have with me my mobile or the BA tune, or for that matter Rod Stewart—I may go along with the sentiments of the song, but that is about it.

This is an important time, when Back Benchers can raise important issues, whether they be world issues, national issues or local issues—the point is that we can get them on the record. None is more important than our troops who are serving on the front line. It is always difficult for those troops who are serving, but more so at this time for their families and friends. I am sure that the best wishes from all parts of the House go to our brave armed forces serving overseas. In addition, there are also the emergency services in this country—people in hospitals who work on Christmas day and people who work in power stations to ensure that the rest of us have a wonderful Christmas. We all ought to give thanks to them, too.

I want to raise a local issue and take us to a village in Chorley, where the Willows sheltered housing can be found. Chorley has its own council housing, like everywhere else, but it decided to offload its housing and set up a company called Chorley Community Housing. Of course, we were given the greatest of promises: lots of investment to come; people to get new kitchens, new bathrooms and renovated homes; people to be supported in their homes. The Willows is a little special: it is a sheltered housing scheme. Chorley Community Housing said that it would invest heavily in the scheme and that, in fact, it would be not just a sheltered scheme, but an extra care scheme, which makes sense for Chorley, because there are only three sheltered accommodation schemes operating in the whole borough.

Hon. Members can therefore understand how important the Willows is to us and to the people who live there—it is their home. They felt that it was the right thing to vote for Chorley Community Housing, but they now feel that it was the wrong thing. What has Chorley Community Housing done, through and with the board of Adactus, the parent company? The chief executive of Adactus told everybody how well he would look after the people in those houses or in the sheltered scheme, only for us to find that people had gone down there—there was some spare accommodation—and been told that it was going to close.

That is a sad situation, which has happened within two years. It is totally unacceptable for Chorley Community Housing, through its Adactus board, even to consider closure. I have to tell them: they have got it wrong. What they should be doing is investing the money that they have promised and putting the extra care in. Closure is not acceptable to the House, not acceptable to the people of Chorley and certainly not acceptable to the people who live there, who call it home. They should not be bullied and intimidated. Hon. Members should beware when such companies come along and make a lot of promises.

It is important that we think about those in every area with no roofs over their heads and no homes, and no more so than in the Christmas period. When we think about people who are living rough on the streets, we can be thankful that the Churches and the charities will play their part to give them shelter and food over the Christmas period. However, in the case of Chorley—a wealthy community and a great place to live—it is absurd that we have a shortage of social housing and that, somehow, the council's responsibility to provide more is not taken seriously. In fact, the council has section 106 money sat there, not being spent, that could be used to provide social housing. It is wrong and it is—how shall say this? I could make it a lot stronger, but all I will say is that it is totally regrettable.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) (LD): It is criminal.

Mr. Hoyle: "Criminal" is another word; it is regrettable that Chorley council will not do right by the people who need that support and shelter, especially as the money is there.

Within that context, people need jobs. We have gone into a recession. All the signs are that we are now coming out of it, but that usually brings another body blow, which is further increases in redundancies. The one thing that we have to learn from the recession is that we must not be reliant on the service and financial industries. We have to reinvest in manufacturing. We have to make this country great once again, so that when we export around the world, we are exporting

[Mr. Hoyle]

products that were made and manufactured in this country. It is not too late. There are cynics who say, "It's too late. We can't put it back," but we can put it back. We have the skills, the technology and the know-how. We must not miss this great opportunity to ensure that our manufacturing is made great again.

Nowhere is that more true than at Leyland Trucks, a big employer in the area and a great, historical name. Quite rightly, Leyland Trucks should be looking for support as well. I know that the company will get a new training grant—that is welcome—and there are talks about the hybrid truck. We talk about Ministers riding round in their Japanese-built hybrid cars, with no British jobs involved and no British components; but in this case we have a hybrid truck, developed by Leyland for the benefit of the climate, to which we should give real support.

I ask hon. Members: do you know what the tragedy of this truck is? Leyland Trucks wants to get partners to trial the truck, and this Government are a shareholder of a big company called Royal Mail, which uses a lot of trucks. Royal Mail has been asked to trial the hybrid truck, but believe it or not, Royal Mail has said no, it does not want to trial it. That is absolutely absurd. We have Royal Mail and a British truck manufacturer leading the world in clean technology with a hybrid truck, and we find that, as a shareholder, we are not putting the pressure on. I know that my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House will take that on board and rattle the cages of Royal Mail, and certainly the Secretary of State's cage too. It is important that if we have a good product, we use it, develop it and export it.

I do go on about our armed forces and how brave they are—I touched on that at the beginning of my remarks—and about the tragedy of what is happening. The Royal British Legion has launched an election manifesto. I know that a lot of MPs have signed up to it—I dare say that a lot of candidates will as well—and it is important that we register our support. The Royal British Legion is calling for an independent legal advisory service for bereaved armed forces families and an independent advisory committee on military deaths to give the families a voice. It is also issuing a call to keep the armed forces compensation scheme under continual review, to bring all single and family accommodation up to the highest standards, to introduce health screening for all service personnel and to introduce more effective prevention and treatment strategies to tackle mental health problems, drinking and drug abuse, as well as calling for support after people leave the armed forces. That fits in with the convention that we expect to see followed. Quite rightly, the Royal British Legion is championing the rights of our armed forces. It is only right that we put support for that on the record.

My constituency is both urban and rural, and there are farms there. Farming matters, not only to our community but to all the other countries around the world. Local farming is important to us all, and reducing the number of miles that our food has to travel will make a significant improvement to climate change. Having local products on sale in local supermarkets can make a real difference. Let us stop buying from all around the world. There is nothing wrong with that—I believe in trade—but it seems daft that carrots grown in Lancashire should be taken to Lincolnshire, and that Lincolnshire carrots should come to Lancashire. We could stop all that. Supermarkets such as Booths, a good quality local supermarket, buy regionally to support our local farmers, and that is what we need the great national supermarkets to do. They do a lot of talking, but talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words, and I expect action from the major supermarkets.

The dairy farmers have also had it rough, and we need to ensure that they get the right price for their products. Setting the right price at the farm gate will ensure that farming has a future in the UK. There is also the question of labelling, which matters to me and to most people, because we care about the welfare of livestock such as chickens reared for egg production, poultry reared as broilers, and beef. We expect the highest possible welfare standards for that livestock. There is nothing wrong with that. We must not allow poor welfare standards to be imported. Any imports should also meet the welfare standards that we expect our farmers to observe. Anyone who wants to export their products to this country should match the welfare standards that we set for our farmers. The nitrate scheme is another area that we need to look at. A lot of pressure has been put on farmers over a period of time, and that matter needs to be looked at and reconsidered.

There was a tragedy in my constituency when a young schoolgirl, Jessica Knight, was in the park at the wrong time and was savagely attacked by a maniac with a knife. She was severely stabbed and is now scarred all over. She survived—that was the good part—but her life has almost been destroyed and her family have suffered as a result of that awful attack. Compensation was paid, and of course it is the taxpayer who pays it. She received £18,000 for what she had gone through, and for the lifelong suffering ahead. That worries me, because it is impossible to judge, so soon after the attack, what she will need. There should have been an interim payment, followed by further payments when we can judge what her requirements are.

We need to look at the compensation scheme. We take away the assets of drug dealers and give them to the police or the Home Office, but why do we not put criminals' assets into the compensation scheme? In that way, we could pay real compensation to constituents such as Jessica Knight. She has suffered so much, through no fault of her own. She was simply in the park at the wrong time. I hope that that can be looked at.

Another issue that I want to talk about is allotments. Local authorities have waiting lists for allotments, but they never take them seriously. That is certainly true of Chorley, where more than 200 people are waiting for an allotment, including the mayor herself. Let us take this challenge to the councils. People have a right to an allotment, and the councils are failing the people, including those in Chorley.

Mr. Hancock: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hoyle: Thank you. It is important that we take on those councils.

My next point is about a UK border force. We should put such a force in place and support it. People come into the UK illegally, and drugs and guns come in and women are trafficked over our borders. We need to put a border force in place. Severely injured service personnel

come back from Afghanistan who do not want to give up their uniform. They might not be able to go back into theatre, but we could use them to set up a border force if they wished. That would make a real difference, and give those people a future. They would be able to keep their uniform and help to protect our borders. We ought to look into that as a matter of urgency.

Another issue that I am greatly concerned about is the child care voucher scheme. It has been widely welcomed, but it is delivered by private companies. How well are they doing? When I asked that question, the Minister who responded told me that the Government do not know the answer because they do not administer the scheme. That is an absurd position to have got ourselves into. Ministers should be on top of their brief. They should be pursuing those companies for their failures. People are waiting up to 12 months to find out whether their child care voucher payments have been made. It is not good enough, and Ministers cannot shy away from ensuring that those companies deliver. This is taxpayers' money. I hope that that matter can be taken on board as well.

My next topic is the great question of electrification. It was good to hear the pre-Budget report, and the announcement that the Preston to Manchester line is to be electrified, because between the two lies Chorley. I know that the Deputy Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley (Barbara Keeley) will benefit from it as well; it will make a real difference. We have overcrowding. We will get new, faster rolling stock, and there will be an increased ability for the trains to stop not only at Chorley but at Adlington. At the moment, we have the absurd situation of trains not stopping because of overcrowding. The answer is to put more trains on, and that is something that Network Rail and the train operators need to consider. Electrification will give us a lot more options. We are also getting the new station at Buckshaw village, with the new park-and-ride scheme. Electrification will mean cleaner, greener trains. We can build on that development, and I am pleased that the Government have listened to my campaign and are delivering on it. I know that my hon. Friend will agree with me on that.

The Coppull railway station on the west coast main line was closed under Beeching. It is now time for that village to be reconnected, through the re-opening of that station.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman has not made such good progress with his campaign for better carriages on the northern franchise, and neither have the Government.

Mr. Hoyle: I cannot disagree with the hon. Gentleman. There is a lot of room for improvement, especially in the standard of rolling stock. After electrification, our rolling stock could be handed over and used elsewhere on the train network. It is not old; it is just too small and cannot carry enough passengers. The major line between Preston and Manchester needs longer, faster trains with greater capacity.

My next point is about bus routes. The county council has been looking into them, and we have now lost the direct link that existed for a long time between Blackburn and Chorley. The buses used to come along Eaves lane and pick people up at the bottom of Great Knowley. That bus now goes via the hospital, which is good, but a lot of people in Lower Wheelton and other areas can no longer use that connection. When bus routes are changed, we need to talk to the people who use them to find out which routes would be the most beneficial, rather than asking someone who sits in an office in a white tower somewhere who says, "I think this is the best route because I looked at it on a map." That is not good enough. We need to empower local people so that they can say which bus routes they want, and where they should go.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is the season of good will, and I wish you and all the staff of the House all the best at Christmas. Let us have a better year next year in the House. I look forward to that, and I wish all hon. Members on both sides of the House all the best for Christmas and the new year.

2.28 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington) (Con): Like my very good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning), I shall not be standing at the next general election, so this could be the last time I participate in one of these debates. My knowledge of procedure might be rather shaky, but presumably there will be some kind of debate at the end of the Parliament that I shall be able to take part in. Perhaps I can look that up.

I should like to follow my hon. Friend's inspired example, although I shall not be changing the ring tone on my mobile. I shall, however, make a point of ringing her when she gets her new tune. I shall hope to hear her dulcet tones, rather than Rod Stewart, who I think is a rather aged act these days. I would rather hear my hon. Friend than that song. I shall follow her example in making a point not about local issues—although I think that it was Tip O'Neill who said "All politics is local"—but about national and international issues. I particularly want to put on record my views on Britain's place in the world, and its interest in the European Union.

I recently read an article that made the point that there are now a large number of regional groupings in the world. South America, for example, has the organisation called Mercosur or Mercado Común del Sur in Spanish—I think it is Spanish, although it may be Portuguese. It is the group of south American nations originally started by Argentina and Brazil, mainly because there was a potential arms race going on between them, but it eventually developed into a trade, investment and, ultimately, democratic group. Any member that wants to join has to be a bona fide democracy. That group of south American countries was originally based on the inspiration of the European Union. There is also ASEAN—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Mr. Hoyle: Uruguay is also a member of Mercosur, but there are associate members that wish to join. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should encourage more south American countries to join?

Mr. Horam: I totally agree. I think that Mexico is now considering joining, along with Venezuela, which is an associate member.

[Mr. Horam]

Returning to east Asia, there is ASEAN, and south Asia has the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation. The Pacific has APEC—the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group—while Africa has the African Union, and there is now talk of changing the Arab League into an Arab Union. All these, originally inspired by the European Union, are essentially concentrating on issues involving security, trade and, in many cases, democracy. The world is breaking up into regional blocs based on continents. That indicates the clear necessity for a medium-sized European country of our kind to be involved in its bloc—in our case, the European Union. Without that, we would simply be diminished, and would have much greater difficulty in making our voice heard in the world.

That puts into context the backward-looking nature of a party like the UK Independence party, for example, which wants us to pull out of the European Union. Thank God all three major parties in this Parliament want us to stay in the EU; there may be differing emphases from different parts of the spectrum, but none the less, that is a common wish. I certainly hope that we will never, ever think about pulling out of the EU.

I notice that someone—the Foreign Secretary, no less—quoted Baroness Thatcher giving a clear indication of what it meant to a country to be part of the European Union. He quoted her as saying:

"The Community opens windows on the world for us that since the war have been closing".

The Foreign Secretary's response was:

"I never thought I would say this but Mrs Thatcher was prescient and right."

Many of us believe that Mrs. Thatcher was prescient and right in many respects, so it was interesting to find that particular quotation in praise of her.

We all know that there are many detailed things wrong with the EU, and things go particularly wrong when it tries to get into what Douglas Hurd, now Lord Hurd, described as the "nooks and crannies" of British life. That is part of the problem, as it becomes unpopular in dealing with all those detailed matters in a rather ham-fisted way—and the Government then apply gold plating. I trust that when a Conservative Government eventually—I hope—take office next year, they will be able to deal with those issues. I am sure that my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench will do their best to bring some common sense to those controversial areas.

The European Union is at its best when it is dealing with larger global matters, whether those be trade or, as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Meg Munn) mentioned, climate change and the environment, and it is making a sensible fist of trying to take the lead globally on such issues. In some ways—although on energy, despite many efforts, it is has not yet got its act together—the EU is way ahead of China and America on those issues, particularly in dealing with civil and military actions all around the world by backing up its actions with European resources and in dealing with foreign policy issues. In that area, Europe has a role and it is important that it play to its full strength. To do that properly, it must first of all get its act together.

It was apparent to me during a Foreign Affairs Committee visit to Washington this year that President Obama was not visibly impressed by what he found in Prague when the European nations met together and discussed issues in a rather squabbling and disagreeable sort of way. He was not impressed, and I gather he said that he would not come back until Europe was more united on some of the issues that he was concerned about. I thought that that was a reasonable comment from an incoming President.

Equally, we must be less subservient to the United States. A stronger voice from a Europe that is less subservient to America helps both America and ourselves. Still on the subject of the relatively new President Obama, nothing was more embarrassing than seeing all those European Prime Ministers scrabbling to be the first through the door to the oval office to speak to the President or Secretary of State or whatever. It is embarrassing; it embarrasses America and it does us no good either. It will be much better if Europe can get its act together and present a clear and distinctive point of view, to which America will listen. On trade, for example, Europe has a point of view—a united point of view—and America is forced to listen, at least much more so than with some of the foreign policy initiatives of recent times.

On Iraq, for example, Europe was not united, and there was a visible divide between countries such as Britain and Spain on the one hand and Germany and France on the other. America still went ahead. We hoped that we would exert some influence on the decision of America, but we had no influence whatever. I personally voted against the war in Iraq, because at the time I did not see that the weapons of mass destruction were any threat to this country, even if they existed; I knew no more than anyone else, but I thought they posed no threat to this country.

It seems to me that if a country presents no threat to the UK, we should not invade it; it is as simple as that. We are now seeing what is coming out of the Chilcot inquiry, and it is astonishing to me that that fundamental mistake was made, way back in the early part of this century. We are paying the price for that now, and the Government are paying a price for the diversion of the time and effort of the Prime Minister and the people from the legitimate concerns about reforming public services and similar matters in this country.

The Government paid a heavy price for that elementary foreign policy mistake, and the truth is that we gained no extra pressure or influence as a result of what we did. There was a point at which the Americans called the French "cheese-eating surrender monkeys", but they are now back in favour. The Germans voted against approving the Iraq war, and they are back in favour, while Britain has no greater standing with America than before. That is something that this country has to get right strategically: we must understand the role of Europe in maximising the power and influence we can have in the world, while at the same time distancing ourselves and being less subservient to America, which, fundamentally, pursues its own interests.

There are areas where Europe can play—and indeed already is playing—some sort of role. At the recent Council, for example, Europe produced a statement on east Jerusalem that was prodding America, which in my view has been rather tame on this subject, into taking some sort of further action, adopting a tougher line with Israel. Secondly, on Iran, the European E3 plus 3 has proposed a series of sanctions over timing, and it is

now clear that a sanctions regime is necessary to try to get the Iranian regime to see any sense, to abide by its obligations under the non-proliferation treaty and more generally to abide by international law, which it is breaking. If we can get some support from China and Russia in this instance, we will have an effect, and Europe is playing a role in achieving that.

Things are clearly much more difficult with Afghanistan. Whatever we do, America has taken the lead and there is very little we can do to influence American policy. However, as a wide coalition is now dealing with the situation in Afghanistan, the sense of the policy, now coming through more strongly from European public opinion than from American public opinion, is that in the end there will have to be some sort of negotiation or political deal. It is not possible to achieve a military victory alone, and it is not possible to rely on military progress alone, although I support the current surge as a necessary part of a long and difficult process of securing something more stable in that country. Europe is clearly beginning to play a role, even though I accept that America is in the lead on this matter.

Europe must pay more attention to its immediate neighbours, particularly Russia, which, after all, is partly a European nation. I do not know whether Members saw a wonderful television programme called "The Art of Russia", broadcast recently, in which Russians said, "We are neither European nor Asian: we are simply Russian." That is true. Russia, plus the countries that surround it—Belarus, Ukraine and the "stans", for instance—is an enormously important part of our geopolitical sphere. If Britain and Europe together could help to bring it more into the context of European policy, they would play a huge part in stabilising the world, enabling America, Europe and Russia to act together. Of course that would be difficult; of course there would be all sorts of drawbacks. Not every initiative prompts a response. None the less, I think that we should try.

Let me end by saying that we need a strong Britain and a strong Europe, despite all the disadvantages that that may involve.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Ind): As the hon. Gentleman is about to end his speech, may I say to him—bearing in mind the comments that he has made, with which I entirely agree—that this House will greatly miss his sagacity and experience after the next election?

Mr. Horam: I feel that I ought to sit down at that point, with the hon. Gentleman's praise ringing in my ears. Splendid! I am very grateful to him.

We need a strong Europe to play a role, and within that role we need Britain to play a significant part. However, it will only be able to play such a part if it has a more coherent view of the policy that it can follow and the position that it can take.

2.41 pm

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I join others in wishing everyone a very happy Christmas and new year.

In my brief contribution, I want to talk about education and the potential for us to offer many more people, in the medium and long term, the opportunity to enjoy much happier Christmases and new years. I refer not just to mainstream education, but the range of complementary policies that need to be introduced in certain areas to add value to the substantial investment that has been made in our mainstream education system. New Labour's mantra in 1997 was "Education, education, education", and rightly so, because education is the route out of poverty for so many people. It is also a route to self-fulfilment. Above all, it is the driver for achievement of the skills base that we need in order to secure the public services and industry that will enable us to survive in the modern economy.

My constituency and the neighbouring black country constituencies provided object lessons, being classic examples of areas requiring that approach. Historically they have been manufacturing constituencies, but the closure of heavy industries during the 1980s and 1990s consigned a generation with relatively low educational qualifications to long-term unemployment. There was a danger that a new generation would grow up in households that had never known employment, or education and the aspirations that go with it. It was for areas such as mine that Labour's priorities were so important in 1997, when unemployment was higher, there was more poverty, and educational achievement was lower—much lower—than the national average.

I am indebted to a project on poverty conducted by students at St Michaels school—which is in an area neighbouring my constituency and yours, Madam Deputy Speaker—which highlighted some of the issues confronting people in my constituency. I hope to present the result to the Minister during the next parliamentary Session.

We have seen an enormous amount of investment in education in local schools. It has risen by some 50 per cent. in real terms since 1997, and that has been reflected in achievement. The number of pupils obtaining five good GCSEs has almost doubled. The number at key stage 1 achieving level 5 in English and maths has risen by a third, and the number achieving that level at key stage 2 in English, maths and science has risen by two thirds. Meanwhile, the number of students entering higher education has risen by nearly 27 per cent.—but although those are significant improvements that reflect an enormous change in the aspirations and quality of life of those who have succeeded, our area still lags well behind the average in the national league tables of education authorities. It is important to focus on the extra problems that prevent areas such as the black country from attaining the higher educational achievements that are found in other areas.

I know of the work that the Government have done. I want to pinpoint one or two areas—one of them in my constituency—which provide a lesson that could be used in other areas. My constituency contains an estate that stood out according to all the normal indices of deprivation: the Tibbington estate, or the "Tibby", as it is affectionately called. It is among the worst 1 per cent. in terms of poverty and low educational achievement, and unemployment is well above the average even for an area with above-average unemployment.

Three years ago, the Safer and Stronger Communities project secured three years of funding to set up a project involving the use of local people with aspirations and a commitment to improving their area to act as mentors for people on the estate. Over those three years they have helped some 400 families with a range of

[Mr. Adrian Bailey]

support mechanisms, but above all they have provided access to both intermediate and higher education for a number of people. The most significant statistic that I have found is the information that 41 received bursaries for colleges and universities. That would have been unthought of before the implementation of the project. That funding is coming to an end, and successor funding must be considered if the fragile growth in regeneration in the area is to be sustained. On Monday I was pleased to hear the announcement of the Connecting Communities project, which will enable 20 young citizens, under a successor scheme, to be recruited to train and implement environmental and other initiatives on the estate, continuing the work on raising aspirations that has already been done.

I want to emphasise the importance of that development. Given the deterioration in the economy, areas of that kind, which were beginning to emerge from years of recession, are obviously more fragile than some others. It is vital not to throw away all the progress that has been made on the Tibbington estate. I am confident that the work being done by Skills Link and the Murray Hall Community Trust will not be wasted. There is considerable evidence that when on one estate it is possible to recruit a critical mass of people who are committed to improving their local environment and bettering themselves, that commitment is transmitted to other people.

There is another area of policy that needs to be acted on if we are to make the most of our investment in mainstream education. I have been working with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and City university, on incorporating speech and language screening in the educational process, so as to secure the specific support needed for certain categories of young people who fail to make the most of education because of inherent speech and language difficulties.

These difficulties can emerge for all sorts of reasons. Young people's home background might hinder them from acquiring normal levels of comprehension or articulacy, or they might have health problems or particular conditions that hold them back. Identifying and addressing the causes of these difficulties is a specialist skill, which has not until now been fully incorporated in the education system. Work to address them is being done by organisations such as the RCSLT and City university, and I wish to highlight the work being done at City university by Professor Joffe and the ELCISS—enhancing language and communication in secondary school—programme. It has conducted a project in Redbridge and in Barking and Dagenham, training teaching assistants to identify pupils with communications problems and the policies needed to address them. It is too early to assess fully the outcomes of this programme, but all the evidence so far is that comprehension, speaking and confidence is improving, and antisocial and disruptive behaviour is dropping, as a result.

There is a similar, and much-needed, programme for the criminal justice system. All too often in the past, young people with speech and language difficulties became disruptive and alienated from the education process because they could not access education in the same way as their fellow students. In time, many of them became alienated from mainstream society—an alienation that often manifested itself in criminal behaviour. It is no coincidence that 80 per cent. of the young people in the criminal justice system have been identified as having speech and language difficulties.

Interestingly, Lord Ramsbotham, a former chief inspector of prisons, was recruited to this cause by a prison governor saying to him, "Whoever else you take out of my prison, keep the speech and language therapist here." If the young people who go through the youth justice system do not receive the education to give them the confidence and abilities to get back into mainstream society once they are released, all we are doing is recycling criminality. Speech and language therapy has an important role to play in this, and I compliment the RCSLT for providing the template for support—and indeed the support itself—that is required in terms of screening and other mechanisms.

I should also briefly mention my visit to Rampton, the secure hospital in Nottinghamshire where there is a team of speech and language therapists dealing with some of the most difficult and challenging patients, and pay tribute to the work that they have done. I was taken around by a patient who had acquired the ability and self-confidence to talk about his problems, and to escort people around the hospital explaining what the staff and patients did and how they dealt with different problems. That is a reflection of the Rampton staff's commitment and the valuable work that they do to improve the quality of life of others.

Projects such as these are not just a frill; they are not just additions bolted on to our system. If we are to get full value from all the money that the Government have invested in education, they are essential. That is because we can only go so far by providing good schools, attractive buildings and inspirational teachers and head teachers, because there will always be groups of people with special problems that need to be addressed. There will also always be communities with no history of participation in education, and changing that culture and level of aspiration will complement all the good schools and inspirational teaching that we have provided.

I ask the Minister to take this point away with her, because money spent on improving young people's education at the earliest stage in their development will make huge savings, both by reducing the number of people in the criminal justice system and by enhancing educational qualifications, and therefore the skills base of our country, which we need in order to survive in the modern world.

2.55 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey), but I am particularly pleased to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) and for Orpington (Mr. Horam). We will miss their presence in Parliament. They have both made serious contributions to this House over the years that they have been Members. I started my ministerial political career with my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, when she was a junior Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and I was a ministerial special adviser. I have therefore worked with her closely over a number of years, and I know that she has made a terrific contribution to this House.

I vie with my hon. Friend, however, in representing one of the most beautiful constituencies in the country. While she was exhorting everybody to go and spend their Christmas in the villages and towns of Devon, I can say that the honey-coloured villages of the Cotswolds look particularly picturesque at this time of year, especially if it snows, and I encourage everybody to come and spend time in the Cotswolds over Christmas.

In the few minutes that are available to me, I shall concentrate not on singing "The twelve days of Christmas", but on discussing the 12 years of this Labour Government and how that has affected my constituency. I have to say that it will not be a flattering account.

In the first year of Labour, we witnessed the beginning of the move away from local authority power, with the introduction of the regional development agencies. The South West of England Regional Development Agency had the wisdom not to appoint a single member from Gloucestershire to its board. It is therefore no surprise to me that Gloucestershire has ever since lost out in RDA grants. The RDAs are not particularly good at objectively stating how they come to their decisions, and they tend to make inconsistent decisions between themselves. I therefore look forward to the coming of a Conservative Government, who will bring about changes in the RDAs.

In the second year of Labour, there was the refusal to fund what I have dubbed the missing link. One can drive on a dual carriageway all the way from Palermo in Sicily in southern Italy to Perth in the middle of Scotland, except for a little missing link in my constituency, joining the M4 to the M5. Although I have campaigned consistently since becoming a Member of Parliament for that link to be built, it never has been, and the cost of doing so is ever rising, while there are more deaths and there is more congestion. I urge this Government—or perhaps I shall soon be needing to urge another Government of a better political hue—to build it.

The third year of Labour gave hope to many of my constituents, because the Government published a rural White Paper. At first, we thought they were a sinner who had repented, because although they were not known for helping the rural areas, it seemed to promise some real hope for the future. Unfortunately, that was very quickly followed by the fourth year of Labour, when the foot and mouth crisis took hold throughout the country. Many of my farmers were very severely hit and, unfortunately, they are still reminded of that as the Government are now saying that they must bear the cost of any future such outbreaks. My farmers are extremely worried about that because the Government do not have control over what may cause foot and mouth in the first place, as we saw from the outbreak in the Government's own research institute in Surrey.

The fifth year of Labour gave my county its biggest ever increase in council tax. An increase of 8.3 per cent. across the country spawned a rise—this is the correct figure—of more than 50 per cent. in the police precept for the county in that year. The sixth year of Labour brought the beginning of the regional fire control centre, to be built in Taunton. That is a massively unpopular enterprise, given that Gloucestershire has one of the best working tri-centre control rooms, in Quedgeley, just outside Gloucester, where the police, fire and ambulance services work superbly together. Having seen the benefits of that, the Government decided in their wisdom to build a regional control centre. That was initially expected to cost £100 million, but this Government are so incompetent at managing finance that the latest estimate is that it will cost £1.5 billion. Why they could not have just left things alone when they were working perfectly properly, I do not know.

The seventh year of Labour gave us the regional spatial strategies, despite my best efforts on behalf of the Opposition to oppose them. I was told by the Government, who were putting them through Committee—one can see this if one looks through *Hansard*—that they were a creature of the Deputy Prime Minister. In other words, the then Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) was desperately trying to get control of the rural areas and, in particular, of planning in those areas, and so he invented the regional spatial strategies. I am delighted that my colleagues who are shadowing the Department for Communities and Local Government will scrap them, and I hope very much that they have the opportunity to do so. These strategies are an unnecessary and unwanted tier of local government.

The eighth year of Labour saw the introduction of a most shambolic piece of legislation: the Hunting Act 2004, which came into force on 18 February 2005. It wasted more than 700 hours of time in this House. Whatever one's views on hunting, one must say that the process has led to a shambolic and unworkable Act, which is unsatisfactory.

In the ninth year of Labour, the Government's action weakened health care provision across the Cotswolds. In that year, Fairford hospital closed because of the severe financial constraints imposed on Costwold and Vale primary care trust. Gloucestershire county council's health overview and scrutiny committee noted that the move

"has had a detrimental effect on the health and experience of the local residents".

Far more seriously in that year was the Government's imposed merger of the excellent Gloucestershire ambulance trust with Wiltshire and Avon's ambulance trusts. I warned at the time that that would cost lives and I take no pleasure in saying that it did so. It delivered a poorer service, but I am glad to say that because of the pressure that my colleagues in the county and I have brought on that trust, it is beginning at long last—several years later—to improve its service. My best Christmas wish to my constituents—in fact, this is four years overdue—is that the long-promised new hospital in Moreton-in-Marsh will come to fruition in 2010.

The flood damage in the 10th year of Labour was, of course, not the Government's fault. I cannot lay the blame for that at their door, much as I would like to do so—I am sure that they can control all acts of God! What I can blame them for is their lack of action. Some 300 homes in my constituency were flooded, as were several schools, doctors' surgeries and other institutions. Two years on from the horrific floods that hit Gloucestershire in 2007, I still do not have total confidence that the same thing would not happen again. Some work has been carried out, but I am not totally confident that the incidents that brought about the cutting off of Mythe water works, which left many thousands of people without water, and that almost took out the substation in Gloucester—that would have left 500,000 people without electricity—would not be caused again.

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

In the 11th year of Labour came a decision to exclude the Swindon to Kemble railway line doubling, which is much needed and would be a very beneficial piece of infrastructure improvement at a relatively reasonable cost. I am glad to say that as a result of the pressure that I have been able to apply, Network Rail still hopes to include that in its improvement projects and it has until the end of the year to come up with the full costing for the scheme. I hope that, through a bit of careful accounting, we have managed to find within the region the funding to do that. Again, it would be very good news for my constituents if that were able to be delivered in 2010.

Also in the 11th year of Labour came the devastating closure of 12 post offices in my constituency. I ran a massive campaign to try to oppose those 12 closures, which were completely daft and without foundation. One of the post offices turned over £500,000 in the month in which it was closed—despite that, it was still closed. The daft thing about the decision is that in order to use a main post office people across more than 100 square miles now have to be funnelled into the centre of Cirencester, all making extra car journeys and having difficulty parking. It was one of the daftest decisions since Beeching. One Labour Member has complained today about the Beeching cuts, wanting the station in his area to be reopened, and I am sure that the same thing will happen over some of these post offices. As well as considering all the closures in my constituency, we need to consider the national situation. In 12 years, Labour has delivered 200 fewer rural schools since it came to power and 384 fewer police stations in the shires. Worst of all, 50 public houses are closing a week at the moment because of Labour's high taxation system.

In the 12th year of this Government, Labour's recession has meant that Renishaw, a leading plc in my constituency, sadly had to make 308 people redundant in Wotton-under-Edge, Stonehouse and Woodchester, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). That was a tragedy for those involved, and I hope that 2010 will bring better news for them and they will be able to find jobs again. The Cotswolds has been badly hit by unemployment; the area had the 23rd highest rise in the number of claimants of all the 646 constituencies, and it had the 61st highest rise since 1997, when this Government came to power.

I wish to finish by discussing two local matters. At Prime Minister's questions, I raised with the Prime Minister the issue of the funding of the further stage for the National Star college. That college provides probably the finest residential training for disabled people in this country, and it is an exemplar throughout the world. The Prime Minister sent me to see the Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs, who promised me that he would urgently look into the matter. The net result was that the 13th Labour college was funded, but not the star college. The Learning and Skills Council produced criteria that the star college was never able to meet, because it was national by its nature, not local or even regional. I hope that the Government will find funding for that college. If they cannot, I hope that an incoming Government will do so. There is a desperate shortage of specialist residential training colleges for disabled people in this country. As I say, the college is an exemplar throughout the world and it reflects how this country treats its disabled people. I hope that the Government will be able to find the money.

The final issue that I wish to raise will affect all Members of this House next year: rating revaluation. Many Members of Parliament will have already been lobbied by businesses in their constituency that will find that their rates will be hugely increased next year. That comes in the middle of a recession when many of those businesses, particularly the small, rural ones, are already suffering. That seems to be a crass time to introduce rating revaluation.

I wish to draw the House's attention to a particular quirk in the rating revaluation: the way in which petrol stations are rated. They are rated on their turnover. I cannot think of a more daft way to rate an industry, because that in effect taxes success: a property tax that taxes success! The rating system was never in business to tax success; it was in business to tax the size of a property. Ironically, Tesco has managed to get a cap on its turnover for rating purposes of £1 million. In other words, it is all very well to tax small petrol stations on their turnover, but big ones are getting away with making huge profits and not being taxed on them. I have no problem with Tesco's making profits in its petrol stations—I wish it well in that—but I want to ensure that all the small petrol retailers in my constituency stay open so that they can provide a service to my constituents.

In my constituency over the past 12 years of Labour, there has been a catalogue of shops closing, pubs closing, hospitals closing, libraries closing, magistrates courts closing and ambulance service mergers. In short, the Government have brought the country to its knees. They have weakened our standing internationally and, as far as the people of the Cotswolds are concerned, have shown a disgraceful attitude to the rural way of life. The recent pre-Budget statement brought home what a parlous state this country's economy is in. As countries such as Turkey, France, Germany and the United States are crawling out of recession, but we are still in recession—with very high rates of unemployment, as well as high numbers of youngsters without a job and not in training, which is such a waste of talent—I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all Members and all the staff of the House a very happy Christmas. Political hostilities will end over Christmas, but come the new year they will be back with a vengeance and I hope that we will get a change of Government.

3.11 pm

Colin Burgon (Elmet) (Lab): I shall try to follow the speech of the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) and the Christmas cheer that so obviously emanated from it.

Over the past 18 months we have lived through a financial and economic crisis of international capitalism that is unprecedented since the great depression of the '30s. Historically unmatched levels of state intervention have been required to stabilise the western economy, which at many times has stood on the verge of collapse. How ironic it is that the agency of government has done the rescuing—an idea that is anathema to all those neo-liberal free-marketeers who took as their guiding mantra Ronald Reagan's comment that government is not the solution, but the problem.

The Government's intervention has crossed the political divide. George Bush's right-wing Government nationalised the two giant US mortgage market companies and in Britain the Labour Government have made bank interventions that have so far cost us about £140 billion, which is equivalent to more than 10 per cent. of our GDP and more than will be spent on the national health service this year.

The state interventions have ended any supremacy claimed by those ideological fanatics who previously argued that unrestrained free markets were the answer to all economic problems. They have spent the past 30 years seeking to extend the market into more and more areas of our life and have also promoted the domination of finance over all other sectors of our economy. Yet just one year later, the same free market zealots in the world of politics and their friends in their media now want to take the axe to the public sector, allegedly to address the problems faced by the economy.

At this point we should ask ourselves three questions. First, how did a financial collapse that brought such damage to the wider economy suddenly become the fault of such people as nurses, teachers, carers and other working people? Secondly, why should the majority of the population suffer, as they will if public services are severely cut? Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, will severe cuts help solve the economic problems that we face?

I want to state that the debate on economic recovery has wrongly and harmfully become dominated by those who argue that only by cutting public services can the issue of growth and the national debt be addressed. That has now become accepted wisdom; it is the received orthodoxy. However, it was once the received medical orthodoxy that the bleeding of patients was a necessary step to recovery. Thankfully, that orthodoxy was overthrown due to the experience of its deadly effects. It therefore needs to be said somewhere, loud and clear, that national debt is the symptom, not the cause, of the recession. To seek to address the debt by attacking Government expenditure fails to tackle the real causes of the economic crisis that have created a deficit.

By engaging in the cuts agenda, either now or in the next few years, we will cause long-term damage or risk a Japanese-style lost decade—or, as some economists are calling it, a zombie economy. Such an economic situation would hit the public finances even more dramatically, leaving us with even larger debts. Instead of the obsession with cuts we need a growth agenda that will allow Government revenues to rise and unemployment to fall and that will, in turn, reduce the debt.

As such an approach breaks with the consensus that has emerged on cutting public services, it may be helpful to put the current levels of national debt into an historical and international context. Government debt, which is at 55 per cent. of GDP in this financial year, is estimated to peak at 78 per cent. in 2014. Although that figure is high, it is far from unprecedented historically. According to the recent House of Commons paper "Background to the 2009 Pre-Budget Report", Government debt was more than 100 per cent. of GDP every year from 1945 until 1963. The same paper adds:

"UK debt would still be below that of Italy, Japan and the US, and broadly similar to that of France and Germany"

at the end of 2010.

Of course, the national debt should be reduced in the future, not least as interest repayments soak up vital resources that could be better spent on schools, hospitals and elsewhere, but contrary to the claim of those on the right, increasing the deficit has been necessary during the worldwide recession—especially as it was so deep. I noticed that William Keegan explained it in *The Observer* in the following way:

"the large deficit...is not the problem: it is an integral part of the solution. It is the reason why we have not experienced the kind of full-scale 1930s-style depression which would have been on the cards without drastic fiscal action."

Furthermore, anyone seriously wishing to address the debt rather than to pursue outdated and ineffective ideological goals might first want to look at how the debt has come about. Were they to do that, they would find that it is the consequence of three things: declining Government revenues; the large bank bail-outs, which amount to more than 10 per cent. of GDP; and, to a much lesser degree, an increase in Government expenditure. Treasury figures estimate an increase in public sector net debt of 18.9 per cent. of GDP between April 2008 and April 2010, excluding the bank bail-outs.

The majority of the increase in the debt has been caused by a fall in Government receipts. As the House of Commons paper "The outlook for the public finances" explains, it is normal during a recession for revenues to fall. Similarly, Government expenditure has also risen, as expected in a recession. That inevitable rise in Government expenditures is due to the so-called "automatic" processes that take place in a recession, such as, for example, the fact that we see more benefits paid out. However, only a minority of the deficit has been caused by the increase in Government expenditure, so I would argue that the calls to cut the public sector display economic incoherence. As Professor David Blanchflower, former member of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee, told the Opposition:

"Cutting public spending in a recession is a really bad idea."

I urge even those people on the Government Benches who are tempted by it to reject it.

So, what is the way forward? What practical polices do we need to address the vital issues of investment and growth? First, we need the Government to use their majority holdings in a number of banks to force the banks to increase investment and lending levels to businesses and to families to revive the economy and housing market. I am one of those who think that there is an element of gutlessness in the way that our Government have dealt with the banks, but we may come on to that later.

Secondly, in those areas where market failure is greatest and private investment has collapsed the most, the Government need to step in and invest directly themselves. Large-scale state investment in transport and housing in such areas would be economically as well as socially useful.

Thirdly, in the really long term, we desperately need to rebalance the economy away from its reliance on finance and develop the industries of the future. The UK has the potential to generate something like 400,000 jobs in green industries, but to fulfil that potential we need state-led investment on a green new deal that would be of tremendous immediate economic benefit and of long-term environmental benefit.

[Colin Burgon]

Fourthly, we can help reflate the economy through increasing levels of consumption by putting money into the pockets of those most likely to spend it. The last 30 years of neo-liberalism have witnessed a smaller and smaller proportion of the economy going to wages. If the Government were to reverse that by raising taxation on the super-rich and then handing over exactly the same amount of money to ordinary families, overall consumer spending would rise, helping the economy to move out of recession.

Finally, for those who advocate cuts, there are areas of public spending that can be cut. We do not need to renew Trident and, although I used to support them, I no longer think that we need ID cards. By cutting those projects, tens of billions of pounds could be saved at a stroke.

The package that I have outlined is only a small example of what could be done. It would be a popular message—I know that sometimes Governments do not like to be "populist", but never mind—and it would deal with the debt and the much larger issue of restoring economic growth.

The alternative to going for growth is a cuts agenda, but cuts are not savings. They would remove demand from the economy and the recession would worsen as the negative multiplier effect kicked in. On this, we need to learn the lessons of history. Roosevelt announced his new deal in 1933, and things went well for three years after the banks were regulated and there was a big increase in public spending. Then, afraid of public debt and under pressure from the right, he began to cut, sending the economy back into a recession from which it did not recover until just before the second world war.

We can also learn from countries that are a bit closer to Britain than America. If we look just across the Irish sea, we can see the slash-and-burn tactics being employed by the Irish Government. The Fianna Fáil Government have overseen savage cuts to the public sector and a real fiscal tightening—something so beloved of the right wing in this country. That has been to the detriment to the wider economy in Ireland, which has continued to worsen. So the debt continues to rise while the Government have become more unpopular as the majority have suffered. Colleague and comrades on the Labour Benches should learn the economic and political lessons from Ireland.

I mentioned Roosevelt in a slightly pejorative way earlier so, in an attempt to balance that, I want to say that I believe that we are in a period of great ideological debate—and that is as it should be in a period of great economic crisis. Basically, the debate boils down to these questions: has the neo-liberal consensus of the past 30 years been correct, and what is the role of Government?

By way of an answer, I shall draw on the words of Roosevelt himself. He said:

> "What is the State? It is the duly constituted representative of an organized society of human beings, created by them for their mutual protection and well-being. 'The state' or 'The Government' is but the machinery through which such mutual aid and protection are achieved."

As we have this huge intellectual debate, I hope that those ideas are remembered. I also hope that we are moving into a period that sees the demise of neo-liberalism.

On that positive note, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you all the best at Christmas? I also wish all the best at Christmas to all hon. Members, and especially to all the staff who work so hard for us here.

3.23 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): If modern buildings and state-of-the-art facilities are the ingredients to make a school successful, then Bishops Park college at Clacton would have been the jewel in the crown of Essex county council. However, it lasted little more than five years before it was judged to be a failure, with some of the poorest examination results in Essex.

Projected figures for pupil admissions did not materialise. Who is now paying for this colossal miscalculation? The college was a costly private finance initiative project; I understand the cost totalled £30 million, a debt which, no doubt, the public purse continues to pay excessively to service.

Bishops Park has now merged with another secondary school in Clacton, and has become an academy. It is one of five secondary schools in Essex transferred to the Academies Enterprise Trust—whose patron at the time of the transfers was, by an extraordinary coincidence, the Conservative leader of Essex county council.

I think that the Department for Children, Schools and Families should hold an investigation into that trust, which has also taken over other secondary schools in different parts of the country. It looks more like a business operation using state funds and state-funded buildings. It is based on an industrial estate next to Hockley railway station.

Bishops Park is not in my constituency, but the relevance to Colchester is this: the same idiotic forward planning by Essex county council threatens future secondary school provision in Colchester, which is the fastest growing borough in the country. Whereas at Clacton the county council hopelessly overestimated the number of pupils, leaving it with the white elephant of the most modern secondary school buildings in Essex, at Colchester, the incompetence is in the opposite direction—a woeful underestimate of pupil numbers, which is being used to justify the closure of two secondary schools in south Colchester in what is, I repeat, the fastest-growing borough in the country.

The latest figure that I have, provided by Colchester borough council's strategic policy unit, shows that there were 1,932 live births in Colchester in 2006, an increase of 276 a year since 2001. The population of Colchester is expected to grow by 30.9 per cent. to 223,500 people by 2021, a population increase of more than 3,000 people every year. Despite that, Essex county council claims that the number of children of secondary school age will fall. The truth is the opposite.

In the "south growth area"—that is, the CO2 postcode area, where the two threatened schools are located—the number of new dwellings totals 3,000, to be built in the period 2001 to 2021. How does that square with the county's contention that there are not enough children in south Colchester to justify the continuation of the two secondary schools?

The consequence of the county's idiotic strategy is that two communities will each lose their community school, in direct contravention of the Government's declared policies, such as the sustainable communities

and safe routes to school initiatives. Hopefully, the Government will find the determination to intervene and prevent the closures when they know that the county council's case is based on false statistics.

The closures will create a postcode lottery of secondary school provision in Colchester, with no secondary schools in postcode CO2, but six in CO3 and two in CO4, with the forward planning people of Essex county council—yes, there are some sensible officers at county hall—already intimating that there will be a need for a third secondary school in CO4 to cater for the huge housing developments planned in north Colchester.

As I stated, however, there is also massive new development in south Colchester, principally at the former Colchester garrison. A quick look at the map shows the stupidity of closing two schools in this part of Colchester and consequently hugely expanding Philip Morant school, possibly to as many as 2,500 pupils, and Stanway school, with some 500-plus children being bussed across town during the busiest times of the day when, like most other towns, there is already huge traffic congestion.

Does it make financial sense at any time, but particularly when there are huge pressures on public expenditure, to spend millions on expanding schools while closing others? As we saw with Bishops Park, it is not new buildings which make a good school. It is the quality of the leadership, the teachers and other staff, and the ethos. This may appear to be purely a local matter, but it has national significance because it highlights—

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. It is not just in Colchester that Essex education authority is making one unholy mess. The authority is closing a secondary school on Canvey Island, where the borough council is planning to build hundreds more houses. It is selling off the school playing fields to build the houses on that land. It is moving the most delinquent youth from all over Essex to a special school on Canvey Island, which has opened, without residents being consulted, in the middle of a residential—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions, as the hon. Gentleman knows, are meant to be brief.

Bob Russell: I thank the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) for highlighting the incompetence of Essex county council. It spreads across the whole of Essex.

The issue is of national significance because it highlights how a deceitful local authority can ride roughshod over the views of the overwhelming majority—96 per cent. of respondents to the county's own consultation were against the proposals, which the county Tories dismissed as being irrelevant. President Mugabe would love to have had 96 per cent.

With such arrogance, it is perhaps not surprising that the Conservatives have a minimal electoral mandate in Colchester. With the school closures a major issue, the Tories lost five seats—and control of the borough council—in May last year, and in this year's county elections they managed to hold only one seat in my constituency, seeing a majority of more than 1,000 slashed to just 19 votes.

Colchester is not only the fastest-growing borough in the country, but the second largest shire district in England. Many smaller places have a unitary council, and if Colchester were a unitary authority, neither of the two threatened schools, Thomas Lord Audley at Monkwick, and Alderman Blaxill at Shrub End, would close.

There is growing support in Colchester for the unitary status that Southend already has. A survey that is currently under way reveals that 80 per cent. of the population want to get away from the control of Essex county council. Such a high figure for county council distrust comes as no surprise—a report this week, to be debated by the council on Monday next week, shows that Colchester is less satisfied with the county council than any other part of Essex, except Harlow.

The so-called "Overall Satisfaction with Essex County Council" survey shows that in Colchester, only 39.5 per cent. of people said that they were satisfied—and that comes from the county council's own survey. Colchester borough council wants both schools to be kept open. Tory-run Essex county council has ignored the borough council, and the huge opposition from residents within the borough, and proceeded with the closure process, but it is not too late for the Government to intervene.

After all, Essex county council promised the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families that it would not shut either school. On 19 May 2008, the Secretary of State told the Commons:

> "Essex county council has explained that its preferred approach is to build on the existing partnership with Stanway school and to pursue a trust. We will support the council in its decision".—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2008; Vol. 476, c. 3.]

Within weeks the county council broke that solemn pledge—given to the Government and given on the Floor of the House. The Secretary of State gave a genuine observation and statement, but the pledge was wilfully broken by the county council within weeks, so I hope that the Government will insist that it sticks to its original promise. The Secretary of State did not deliberately mislead the House; rather, he and his officials were misled by Essex county council. I urge him to prevail upon the county council to fulfil the promise that it gave last year and to drop the closure proposals for Alderman Blaxill and Thomas Lord Audley schools.

There is clearly a problem of democratic accountability, with the passing of Government control to quangos, such as the Office of the Schools Adjudicator and Partnerships for Schools, the latter being responsible for Building Schools for the Future. Local residents and even Colchester borough council cannot get the schools adjudicator or Partnerships for Schools to look at what is clearly a miscarriage of the truth by Essex county council, so the Secretary of State and his officials must surely exercise powers of intervention. We are talking about politically motivated discrimination by the Tory-run county council, and that will be to the detriment of future children of secondary school age throughout my constituency. It will be a costly blunder, leaving others in a few years' time to pick up the consequences of the Chelmsford-based, Tory county hall vendetta against Colchester.

I do not object to investment in schools in my constituency. I am, however, opposed to wasteful expenditure. Essex county council says that £130 million will be invested from Building Schools for the Future.

[Bob Russell]

During the consultation, however, the council quoted a figure of £100 million, and as recently as August this year official council minutes referred to £150 million. The county council has failed to give a breakdown of how it arrived at any of those figures, and Partnerships for Schools has not been given a breakdown, either. Can anyone really trust anything that Essex county council says? The people of Colchester do not. There is no guarantee that what the county council has promised the head teachers will actually materialise.

The Government have spoken about super-heads, but that is meaningless unless they take action. In Colchester, we have just such a person—the inspirational Mr. Jonathan Tippett, who has transformed Stanway school into one of the best in Essex and removed Thomas Lord Audley and Alderman Blaxill schools from special measures. Last summer he led Thomas Lord Audley to its best exam results in its history, with September's year 7 intake being the largest it has seen in several years, making nonsense of the county council's claims that it is a failing school with falling numbers. One man is running those three schools in such an inspirational way that the county council should let him get on with it, and the Government should insist that he be allowed to continue this overwhelming success story at minimal cost to the public purse.

In May last year, the Secretary of State informed the House that the three schools under Mr. Tippett's executive headship should go forward as a trust or a federation. Let us have happen what the Government were led to believe by Essex county council would happen as recently as last year. That would be the most cost-effective resolution to secondary school provision in Colchester. It would allow the communities of Shrub End and Monkwick to retain their local secondary schools while allowing a much better value-for-money injection of funds into secondary school education across Colchester, notably a new building for Sir Charles Lucas arts college at Greenstead, in preference to the county council's wasteful and otherwise unwanted proposals.

3.36 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), especially as he serves on the Home Affairs Committee. He is always able to bring important issues of concern to do with Essex, especially Colchester, here to the Chamber. I think the House would wish to congratulate him on being the runner-up in "The X Factor" competition—not he himself, of course, although he could be a rival to SuBo if he tried very hard, but one of his constituents, Olly, who was pipped at the post by this year's winner.

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): I believe that Olly came from my constituency, Braintree, rather than that of the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell).

Keith Vaz: I am so glad that the hon. Gentleman came into the Chamber just to tell me that; I am sure we are grateful for the clarification. However, Olly is an Essex boy, is he not, so he and the hon. Member for Colchester can both claim a bit of him.

Recess Adjournment debates, either in the summer or at Christmas, used to be occasions where Members encouraged other Members to come to their constituencies. That has always been a feature of the speeches by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning). We were given such invitations, in a way, by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) and my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Colin Burgon). However, they then related tales of woe, one about the collapse of capitalism and the other about the vicious 12 years that the poor people of Cotswold have experienced. I do not think I can go to the Cotswolds this Christmas after that sad speech by the hon. Gentleman—I will simply stay in Leicester with my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby).

These debates have always been an opportunity for Members to say that the House should not adjourn until it has been able to consider certain matters. We never have a vote at the end of the debate—partly, I am sure, because whichever Minister sums up is able to satisfy us that all our concerns have been met, so there is no need to prevent the Adjournment of the House. I live in hope that one day someone will oppose the Adjournment of the House just to see what would happen—that has not happened in my 23 years here. I hope that it does not happen tonight, however, because I am sure that we all have important constituency engagements to get to.

I wish briefly to raise four issues, the first of which concerns the case of Gary McKinnon. It is very important that we have some clarity from the Government as to precisely what they are doing in relation to that case. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton has been one of the champions of Gary McKinnon in his fight to be able to satisfy the legal authorities in this country rather than in the United States of America. She has campaigned strongly to enable his case to be dealt with here, as has his own Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Burrowes).

Of course, the Home Secretary has said that he has considered the evidence that Gary McKinnon's lawyers put before him, but that he is of the view that the extradition can proceed and that Mr. McKinnon should be able to be tried in the United States of America. Only yesterday, Mr. McKinnon's brave and honourable mother Janis Sharp led a protest outside the Home Office, which Members of all parties attended. She was urging the Home Secretary to think again about the matter. In this closing debate before the recess, I urge him to look again at the case and to do what he did a few weeks ago, which was to stop the clock on the extradition.

I know that the Home Secretary has said on a number of occasions, as he repeated to the Home Affairs Committee yesterday, that he feels that he does not have the power to intervene and that it is up to Mr. McKinnon's solicitors to make an application for judicial review. However, I wonder whether he will consider instructing different lawyers from those on whose advice he has reached his conclusions. A number of people, including Mrs. Sharp and the Select Committee, have seen legal advice from solicitors and leading counsel other than those on whom the Home Office relies suggesting that the Home Secretary does have the discretion to intervene in this case if he chooses to do so.

Surely a fundamental principle of how we are governed is that at the end of the day, Ministers have the power to intervene. There must be an inherent power that rests with the Crown and is exercised by Ministers, which ought to allow them to intervene in cases when they feel it is in the public interest for them to do so. I am sure that that applies not just to the Home Secretary but to other Ministers. When I was a Minister at the Foreign Office responsible for entry clearance, I was given largely the same advice as the Home Secretary on the matter of Ministers intervening in entry clearance cases. Because I was not satisfied with the advice that I received, I sought other legal advice. Lo and behold, the advice that I received was that of course it was possible to intervene in such cases.

I say to the Deputy Leader of the House that it is important that we pause and think about this case, which has a lot to do with the pride of the American Government. I understand that, and I recently met the American ambassador, Mr. Susman, who was recently appointed by President Obama. He was very courteous and respectful about the powers of this House and the remit of Select Committees, and I said to him that in our view, whether our Ministers could intervene was a fundamental principle. Interestingly, although the American Secretary of State has not intervened in the case of Amanda Knox—I take no view on that case, except that she has been convicted in a criminal court in Italy, and if we accept the rulings of EU courts she is guilty of her criminal offence—even the American Government are prepared to make supportive statements about their citizens. I hope that our Government, and the Home Secretary in particular, will be prepared to intervene in Mr. McKinnon's case, and I hope that he will think again about his decision.

The second issue that I wish to mention is the crisis affecting the health services in respect of diabetes. We are facing a pandemic of diabetes in this country. As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have declared on a number of occasions the fact that I was recently diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. Late diagnosis is a problem. I am now in my early 50s, and if that diagnosis had taken place earlier I could well have avoided becoming a diabetic. There are currently 7 million people in this country who have pre-diabetes. In other words, they have a disposition to diabetes, but have not been tested and therefore have not been warned, and they have the possibility of developing diabetes in later years.

There are many causes of type 2 diabetes. Stress is one, so any Member of the House probably has an immediate predisposition to diabetes. Obesity is another, although I do not cast any aspersions on any Member. However, type 2 diabetes is also related to the intake of sugar.

It is important that the health service understands the problem. The fact that we spend £1 million an hour on diabetes—£980 million a year on treatment for the condition—and that one in 10 people in our hospitals suffers from some form of diabetes should alert Ministers to the problem.

At the moment, 2.3 million have diabetes, and it is possible that some of our children, even those as young as two or three, according to university of California research, also have a predisposition to the condition because they have access to fructose, which is a sweetener sometimes used in children's products. If the predisposition is not checked, it will lead in later life to diabetes.

I know that you are a grandfather, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so you know a number of young children. The children of the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara), the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, attended the Christmas party only last week. I hope that he noticed that there was no food for those like me at the party—this is my reason anyway—because the food offered was very sweet. That would not have helped the children who were trying to fight a predisposition to diabetes. We have to be on the alert. Ministers should understand that spending money on preventive work now will mean that we save not only a lot of money in the long run, but many lives.

Thirdly, on policing costs, the hon. Member for Colchester will know, because he attended the Home Affairs Committee sitting yesterday, where he was able to cross-examine, with his usual forensic skill, the Home Secretary and the head of the National Policing Improvement Agency, that the Home Office has spent £400 million in the past four years on consultants—people who advise the permanent secretary how to run his Department better and how to get better value for money. The chief constable of the NPIA, Peter Neyroud, told us that last year, which was the year before his appointment, the NPIA, which exists to provide police forces with advice on how they can improve efficiencies, spent £71 million on consultants. He did not believe that that provided value for money for the NPIA.

The problem for those in positions of responsibility—the decision makers as far as the public purse is concerned—is whether to spend money on more consultants. The Home Office and the NPIA have spent nearly half a billion on consultants, and goodness knows what individual police forces spend on them. If we look at the amount of savings that must be achieved by every police authority in the country and at the constant desire of Members on both sides of the House for visible policing, we see where the problem lies. Our police budgets will face severe challenges next year. If we are looking to cut the overall budget for local police forces, which I am against—the Government say that they are not doing that, but a number of police authorities claim that they are—it is important to look at things such as the amount of money spent on consultancies and consultants and to try to reduce it.

My final point concerns Yemen, the country of my birth. I declare an interest—I recently visited the country, partly as a guest of the Yemeni Government, as I have done over the past few years as chairman of the all-party group on Yemen. I was born there and left with my sisters and mother when I was nine years of age. As I have gone back, I have seen a country that has developed in certain areas. However, at the moment, Yemen faces a crisis, and the problem is that al-Qaeda has decided that it wishes to occupy parts of the country and to act against the Government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The result is instability.

The American Government and our Government have sought to try to ensure that the Yemeni Government are supported. The US Government have sent people to train Yemeni troops, and our Government have done much to increase the amount of aid that the Yemeni Government get, but every day we read about problems in that country. It is the second biggest country in the Gulf, but it is often forgotten, because it is very poor. Everybody concentrates on Dubai, which is having its

[Keith Vaz]

great bubble—some say that it has burst, and others say that it has not—and it is a great holiday destination for British citizens, but it is important that we provide whatever support the President and Government of Yemen need to maintain the stability of that vital country.

For example, we have been trying for 20 years to get the Queen Elizabeth hospital—I was born there—rebuilt. We have gone to the EU to try to obtain resources to fund the hospital. South Yemen was part of the British Empire, eventually obtaining independence, and there is therefore a post-colonial tie between the UK and Yemen. We have a responsibility to help with projects that would be of benefit to the people of Yemen and we must reassert our support for that important country. I know that the recess is upon us and it will be difficult for Ministers to ring up the Foreign Office and get briefings on the issue, but I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will say something positive about our support for that important country. If anything happened to Yemen, it would seriously affect the stability of the whole Gulf region, and therefore of the world.

Finally, I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, everyone in the House and all the wonderful people who serve us in this magnificent Palace a happy Christmas and new year.

3.51 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): In a similar vein to my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), I wish to raise several issues. This is the last Christmas Adjournment debate before we face a general election, and this has been a dreadful year. Labour has succeeded in destroying the country and it has destroyed this place. The place in which we work has been greatly diminished. We are seen as an irrelevance and no longer as an attractive ornament. What has happened in the past year is an absolute travesty.

Underlining everything, we have the terrible state of the British economy. We owe £178 billion and the Government are trying to kid us all that they have done a splendid job in running the finances and the problems are just part of the world phenomenon. Every Wednesday the Prime Minister used to come to the Dispatch Box and tell us that he had abolished boom and bust. Well, my constituents are puzzled about where the boom has been, and they are convinced that this country is bust. I lay the blame entirely at the feet of this Government.

As chairman of the all-party group for small shops, I spent the summer visiting every small shop in my constituency. My goodness, times are tough for them. The slogan "If you don't use 'em, we'll lose 'em" is true. They are having a very tough time in competition with the larger supermarkets, as several of my hon. Friends have mentioned. I hope that colleagues on both sides of the House will rally round at a reception early next year to support small businesses. I am very worried about the state of our finances, and we will not come out of recession until next year.

A related issue is the pay of public servants. The allowances and payment of parliamentarians have come under great scrutiny this year for several reasons. Many suggestions have been made about how we could save money. However, it is not clear how the pay of other public servants, especially at senior levels, will be judged and scrutinised under the freedom of information legislation. Some of them seem to be completely impervious to such scrutiny.

The electorate employ us as Members of Parliament and they renew, or end, our contract at a general election. However, it has not yet been determined how other senior public servants and leaders of these umpteen quangos can be removed from office if the general public are dissatisfied with their performance. As long ago as 2000, I raised the issue of public appointments in South Essex health authority in a Westminster Hall debate. It was all about the merger of two trusts and how people with mental health problems would be regarded in the future. I mentioned the potential appointment of a chief executive, and I remember clearly how the then Labour Minister dealt with the issue. Basically, I was told that Southend and Thurrock would be merged, but it turned out to be a takeover by the Thurrock trust. The person to whom I referred in that debate was appointed as chief executive, and recently, under the Freedom of Information Act, it has been found that nine years on that gentleman is paid more than £200,000 and received a bonus of £17,500. This is absolute madness!

We hear constant reports in the press about Members' allowances, and quite rightly there will be changes to the proposed system, and of course there is the furore surrounding bonuses for bankers working for the financial institutions bailed out by the British taxpayer. Yet where is the scrutiny of public sector pay of senior people in, for instance, the health service and police? The right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) alluded to that point. The payment of public sector executives is completely cut off from the harsh realities of the UK economic situation. The average family is struggling at the moment. The Government should pay more attention to that situation.

Over the past three years, Essex has had three chief constables. The first chief constable's contract was not renewed, the second took early retirement and a third was appointed this year. The third was apparently one of three candidates, but the other two dropped out of the competition. In other words, there was a choice of one, and he was appointed. I and, presumably, my Essex colleagues were never told of the appointment until 26 October, when I received a letter from the new chief constable's personal assistant stating:

"You may like to amend your records to reflect that Mr Jim Barker-McCardle was appointed as substantive Chief Constable with effect from the 9th September 2009".

There was no embarrassment at all. My goodness! When this place had some standing, on the appointment of a new chief constable, Members would, out of common courtesy, be sent a letter from that person informing them of the appointment. We have become such an irrelevance that we do not get any letters from chief constables—we are not even told that a new one has been appointed—and when we complain to Ministers, they simply say that they have no responsibility in the matter. It is disgraceful!

Even the former chairman of the Police Federation has, in a Home Office-commissioned report, criticised the complex organisational and decision-making structure at the top of the policing system, which generates confusion about accountability among police officers. I

must say that although the Independent Police Complaints Commission is very well led, in reality its judgments have no teeth. Any judgment is simply given to the chief constable, who does not seem to be responsible to anyone. I cannot see the purpose of Essex police authority.

As we all know, the cost to the country of the war in Afghanistan and our previous involvement in Iraq has been very high, not just financially, but—much more importantly—in the loss of young lives. Many of us had the honour of greeting troops returning from Afghanistan last month. They are doing an incredible job under very difficult circumstances. Last Monday we lost the 100th British soldier in Afghanistan, and two more have been killed recently.

All of us are watching the Chilcot inquiry very carefully, but however soft the questioning is, it seems certain that the previous Prime Minister did not tell the truth to the House of Commons about why we should get involved with Iraq. The former Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Ken Macdonald, said that the ex-Prime Minister engaged in an "alarming subterfuge" with the then American President. The former Prime Minister has now told us, in an interview with a celebrity, that he would have gone to war regardless of whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. I am one of those Conservative Members of Parliament who were stupid enough to believe what the then Prime Minister said, but it was not his choice to make; it was the choice of this House of Commons. It is an absolute disgrace that he has come out with that statement in a soft interview with a celebrity.

I hope that when the former Prime Minister gives evidence next year, some action will be taken as a result of what he says. I think that he deliberately misled Parliament on that issue, and why oh why he was so sycophantic to the United States of America I cannot imagine. Even the new American President, who in the build-up to the American election talked about cutting troop numbers in Afghanistan, is now sending another 30,000, which is more than his predecessor sent. What is going on now is absolutely crazy. Why the American President got the Nobel peace prize, before he had done anything whatever, I do not know. Again, that astonishes me.

I am the chairman of the all-party group on solvent abuse. Solvent abuse receives very little attention, despite the fact that NHS research shows that volatile substances are the most common entry-level substances among young people who choose to take drugs. More children aged 13 and under use volatile substances than use any illegal drug. St. George's, university of London has done some excellent work in its report, "Trends in Death Associated With Abuse of Volatile Substances", and I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will urge a Secretary of State to have a meeting with the all-party group.

A constituent, Mr. Congdon, has raised the issue of Vioxx with me. He very much wants compensation for UK users of Vioxx from Merck, Sharp and Dohme. Tragically, his wife died as a result of taking that prescription painkiller. From 1999 to 2004, Vioxx was widely prescribed as a painkiller for arthritis, migraines and menstruation. There have been many lawsuits in America, but in this country nothing whatever has been done about giving compensation.

Another constituent, Kevin Jones, raised with me the issue of tax credits. Having phoned the so-called helpline, I could not have found the person who answered to be ruder. When I said, "This is a helpline," and told her that I was an MP, she said, "So what?" If anyone wants proof of how diminished we are out there, there it is, on the so-called helpline. What has happened with tax credit claims that were overpaid is an absolute shambles and has certainly caused enormous difficulties for many constituents.

Last Friday I met the Southend Association of Voluntary Services, whose job it is to advise and support local not-for-profit groups. It does a wonderful job under difficult circumstances. However, as with many third sector organisations, budget cuts have forced the association to cut down on a number of its activities. One of the most worthwhile projects that it runs is the vinvolved project, a volunteering project for 16 to 25-year-olds. The funding is secured only until March 2011, and I would be grateful if the Deputy Leader of the House could see what she can do to encourage the Treasury and others to give that excellent organisation some support.

Last week I spoke at the National Audit Office's rheumatoid arthritis conference, in my capacity as the joint chairman of the all-party group on inflammatory arthritis. A National Audit Office report entitled "Services for people with rheumatoid arthritis" was published in July, and it makes it clear that services are very patchy throughout the country. I hope that the Health Secretary will do whatever he can to bolster support for people suffering from arthritis.

During the summer Adjournment debate, I raised the issue of seat belts. We all remember the row that took place in the House when we first voted to make seat belts compulsory. A number of Members of Parliament thought that it was not the right thing to do, although it turned out to be completely the right thing to do. However, some people, in order to be more comfortable, do not wear their seat belts as they should. Instead of the collar bone taking the full force in an accident, damage can be done to the ribcage and to vital internal organs. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will pass on my concerns on that issue to the Secretary of State for Transport.

We often think about animals at Christmas time, and I hope that there will not be the usual number of unwanted pets this year. I was recently at a gathering organised by the International Fund for Animal Welfare to celebrate the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. That organisation does a wonderful job of looking after animal welfare. As the animals are unable to speak for themselves, I hope that at this time we will do all that we can to support their welfare and to ensure that there are not too many unwanted pets this Christmas. I join all others in wishing everyone a very happy Christmas and a much better new year.

4.6 pm

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): Last Tuesday, I was called by an excited researcher from one of my local radio stations who asked me if I was aware that Leicester had been named as the crime capital of the east midlands. While I was trying to catch my breath, following that astonishing announcement, the young researcher went on to tell me that it was a city in which

[Sir Peter Soulsby]

public services do not work well together and in which not enough was being done to tackle the major problems that many local people face. She also told me that people's health was worse there than anywhere else in the east midlands, and that too many of them were dying early—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it sounds like Essex, doesn't it?

I simply did not recognise the city from the description that the researcher was giving me, although I would not suggest for a moment that it is without problems. When I had caught my breath, I asked her for the source of her information. She told me that it was the Audit Commission. As a former member of the Audit Commission, I took that fairly seriously and agreed to go on air to talk about the matter. Before doing so, I did some research into the background.

The description had come from a person called Mary Perry, who is rather grandly titled the Oneplace spokesperson for Leicester. I understand that she is also the Oneplace spokesperson for a number of other places in the east midlands. My research allowed me at least to understand the context of the description. The work that it was announcing is very worth while. It is an attempt to bring together the results of the various inspection regimes that look at local authorities, including the Audit Commission—the lead body involved—the Quality Care Commission, Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons and Ofsted, and to bring all the data that they produce in their reports together in one place, to make it accessible to the public on a single website. That is of course very welcome.

It is some years since I was a member of the Audit Commission. At that time, we used to look forward to the prospect of what was then described—it might still be—as joined-up inspection. That would involve bringing the various regimes together in a way that made sense to the bodies that were being inspected, and to the public, on whose behalf the inspections were taking place.

The principles that the Audit Commission followed then, and does now, involve ensuring that the performance indicators used in the inspections are relevant, that they avoid creating perverse incentives, and that the conclusions that are drawn at the end of the inspection processes are firmly evidence-based. Of course, in looking at the inspection, as I hope the Audit Commission and the other regimes that inspect our local authorities and our local bodies now do, I hope that the approach will be robust and independent when necessary, while also being a critical friend rather than a hostile outsider when that is the more appropriate approach.

It was with that in mind that I looked at the news release from which the researcher was drawing a picture of the city of Leicester. Indeed, Mary Perry, this Oneplace spokesperson for Leicester, described the city as one where the partnership

"is not giving crime a high priority."

She continued:

"Recent crime figures are the worst in the East Midlands. Community safety partners need to work together more effectively to reduce crime and make the city safer for local people."

I could go on and refer to other elements that the researcher had drawn out from the press release.

I have to say that that description of the city is not one that those involved in the various partnerships and bodies that provide services to the city would recognise—and it is certainly not one that I recognise either. It does not represent what any reasonable person who knows the city would consider to be a balanced judgment about it and the services it receives. The press release is based on broad generalisations and contains, frankly, headline-grabbing snippets. No doubt that was done with the very best of intentions and no doubt it was done with the intention of drawing people's attention to the launch of the new initiative, to the website that lies behind it and the overview that it seeks to give. Frankly, however, it does nothing for the reputation of the Audit Commission or the other inspectorates that contributed to it.

The Audit Commission has raised a lot of questions about the data lying behind the news release that described Leicester in that way and led the researcher to conclude that the city was the "crime capital" of the east midlands, but it has not helped to point the way to those who seek to find answers to the questions, which include: what sort of crime figures—are they recorded crime figures, reported crime figures, or crime figures as perceived by the victims of those crimes? None of those questions is answered, so I believe that to be shoddy work from the Audit Commission.

It would indeed be perverse if Leicestershire constabulary, which has such an excellent record of encouraging people to report crimes and of encouraging its officers to record them when they are reported, were to be penalised as a result of the success of those policies on encouraging the reporting and recording of crimes, yet that is precisely the sort of conclusion that the casual reader would reach from that news release. It would also be perverse indeed if this led to Leicestershire constabulary doing what I understand other constabularies sometimes do—actually encouraging people not to report and officers not to record crimes. It seems to me that, on this occasion, the Audit Commission has made a serious mistake in the way it has sought to promote that new website and the excellent initiative in which it plays a lead part.

I have tried to look behind the figures, but in looking at the website, I have frankly not been able to find out how those conclusions were reached or what sort of crime figures were used in reaching them. I have discovered from talking to those who are part of the community safety partnership in Leicester that there are a lot of very unhappy and very committed people who were involved in the promotion of community safety in the city, but who are deeply disappointed, deeply upset and deeply distressed by the resulting publicity that followed the news release.

I am deeply unhappy by the approach that has been adopted. I am particularly unhappy because, while it may get a headline, it certainly does not do justice to the city, and it certainly does not do justice to those who are concerned for its well-being.

The Audit Commission and the other inspectors have come up with a very simplistic way of describing services in the city of Leicester and, indeed, in other local authority areas up and down the land. It boils down to the use of flags: red flags and green flags. Other hon. Members may well be familiar with such arrangements in their areas. While the use of such simplistic devices may be attractive in terms of drawing attention to things—for instance, the new website—it is over-simplistic in this context, and difficult to justify.

I have noted the green flags given to the areas around Leicester, and the lack of green flags relating to any of the services in Leicester itself; I have noted the red flags given to the areas around Leicester, and the red flags given to the city itself; and I have reached the conclusion that the choice of green or red flags is entirely subjective.

Dr. Pugh: There has been a certain amount of mission creep in the Audit Commission. Perhaps it should stick to what it is supposed to be doing, examining councils' finances—or perhaps not, following the "Icelandic saga" fiasco.

Sir Peter Soulsby: For a long time the Audit Commission has had a much wider role than that of simply examining the finances of local authorities, which was originally the role of the District Audit Service. It has been given that wider role by both the last Government and this one. I think it has long aspired to bring some order to the plethora of inspection regimes covering local services, and I think it is right to wish to do that, but I believe that on this occasion it has gone too far in its enthusiasm for bringing order and simplicity, and has over-simplified.

The work that the Audit Commission has done is unreasonable in the circumstances. There is a total lack of consistency in the way in which it has presented Leicester and other local authority areas, and it has left unanswered far more questions than it has answered. Its approach has done a disservice to Leicester, and to its own work on behalf of recipients of services in Leicester and other areas.

As I have said, it is vital for inspectors who look at cities such as Leicester and other towns, cities and counties up and down the land to seek performance indicators that are relevant and avoid perverse incentives. Above all, they must ensure that their conclusions are firmly based on evidence. The flag system that the inspectors have used and the press releases that they have issued do not meet those tests. They do not demonstrate a regime that is robust and independent, and they certainly do not demonstrate one with an entirely objective approach. This is not a regime that appears to be a critical friend rather than a hostile or even bullying outsider.

The Audit Commission, and those involved in the other inspection regimes, should look closely at the way in which they have handled the launch of the Oneplace initiative. Although the initiative has much to commend it, they need to recognise that a single snapshot—which is how they themselves have described the work that they are doing—can be simplistic and even damaging. It may produce a headline for them, but it does not get anywhere near the truth as it is actually experienced by people in the city of Leicester or, I would suggest, elsewhere.

Finally, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me join other hon. Members in wishing you and, of course, the staff of the House a very happy Christmas and a prosperous and peaceful new year.

4.19 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) (LD): First, may I follow the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) in wishing everyone present a happy Christmas, just in case I forget to do so at the end of my speech? As I represent a constituency in Portsmouth, which has one of the largest populations of service personnel, may I also wish all our service personnel around the world a happy Christmas, and in particular may I wish those who are in Afghanistan a peaceful and pleasant festive season? I also want to wish service personnel families a happy Christmas, as this can be a very difficult period for them, and assure them that the thoughts of the entire House—of Members of all parties—are with them.

I pay tribute to the Royal British Legion, too. I doubt if its work has been as important as it is today since it was founded in the aftermath of the first world war. I urge all Members to give their support to the British Legion in the forthcoming election. I am sure that not a single candidate in the entire country will decline to back it, but let us set an example by backing it first now.

I should also declare an interest, as I want to talk about certain issues affecting the city of Portsmouth and, as is stated in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I am a member of Portsmouth city council and its executive. The first issue is Portsmouth's serious housing problem. I agree with the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) about the importance of housing. Portsmouth's current housing problem is probably as bad as it was in 1945, when a third of the buildings in the city had been demolished or severely damaged by the Luftwaffe, sizeable chunks of it had to be bulldozed down, and tens of thousands of people were moved outside the city.

The Government have promised a lot on housing, and particularly on council housing, yet they have not delivered. We have heard the words, but they have yet to walk the walk and provide the money. Even at this late stage, as we approach a general election, I ask the Government to give powers to use section 106 moneys to improve and construct council properties, and to give local authorities back the initiative to be able to build the sorts of properties that they know they need to satisfy their housing demand. In contrast to private developers who want to build only what they know they can sell, local authorities have a responsibility to house all sorts of people, such as families of various sizes and those with lifestyle difficulties such as disabilities, who might need special adaptations in their properties. We need to free up local authorities, and we need the Government to give assistance, not cut it, as is being suggested by some commentators.

The second issue affecting Portsmouth was raised in the House yesterday: defence spending, particularly in the context of the Royal Navy. Month after month, I am depressed by the indecision and the briefings that are given or the leaks that are allowed to be made, especially about the aircraft carrier programme. One minute it is on, the next minute it may be off, or it is being reconsidered, reorganised or delayed. What effect do Ministers think that sort of indecision has on the morale of the work force in Portsmouth who have been loyal to the Ministry of Defence and the national interest for generations, and whose city's main industrial backbone is based on support for the MOD?

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Unusually, I have to say that the hon. Gentleman is being unfair to the Government. I am a Front-Bench spokesman on

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

defence and I have heard the Government say over and over again that the carriers will go ahead, so for once I feel that he is being unduly alarmist.

Mr. Hancock: I am convinced in my heart that the carriers will go ahead, but why do the Government allow the speculation to continue? Why do they not, once and for all, give proper dates and stick to them? Yesterday, I asked the Secretary of State whether he could categorically assure the House, the country and, more importantly, people whose livelihood depends on the carriers that the dates that the Government have announced will be stuck to. It simply is not good enough to treat people in this way.

We have to make a proper analysis of what we need to spend on defence. The Royal Navy is as important today as it has been in past generations, and the future of the naval base in Portsmouth is important in that respect. We should be looking to give the Royal Navy the resources that it needs to provide the punch that the Government demand of it by their overseas commitments and their use of force on occasion. Again, we cannot talk the talk without producing the right sort of resources. We should give clear direction to show our armed forces that there is a future for people who enlist in the Royal Navy, and to show those on the industrial side, in shipbuilding, that their careers will not be affected because the Government have changed their mind.

Thirdly, I wish to discuss the way in which we deal with some immigration cases. I deal with a phenomenal number of these cases, and I would imagine that half the people in the two advice centres that I hold each week have an immigration case or a problem related in some way to one. I am amazed at the number of times that I have been able to get people removed from detention. Some of these people have been picked up off the street, or have been detained when they have gone to report to the police station, as they have to do on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

Most recently, I encountered the case of somebody who was detained in the city of Portsmouth, taken to Heathrow the same day, and told that they were to be deported within 48 hours I spoke to the relevant Minister's office, and I was delighted that the Minister was able to stop that. More importantly—this was beyond belief—I discovered from the immigration officer dealing with the case at the Heathrow holding centre that the person could not be deported because his papers were deficient and the country to which he was to be deported would not have accepted him. We had probably spent several hundred—if not thousands—of pounds detaining that person, only for him to be freed again, returned to live at home and told that he had to continue to report. I asked why that had been done, but nobody has yet been able to give a satisfactory answer.

The problem is that that case is one of a dozen or so cases in the past three months of people being detained, sometimes for a week or a fortnight, only to be released subsequently with no real account having been given of why they were detained in the first place and why they were subsequently released into exactly the same circumstances as before they were detained. Again, there appears to be a lack of coherence in the UK Border Agency's way of dealing with these cases.

I am perfectly supportive of the idea that people who do not deserve, or do not have a right, to be here should be removed, but for goodness' sake let us do it in a way that everybody understands. We should not pick people up, detain them in a detention centre and threaten them daily that they are about to leave the country, when we know that we are not in a position to deport them to another country because they do not have the papers that would allow us to do so. How on earth can that be logical or in anyone's interests, least of all those of the Treasury, which must be at its wits' end with the UKBA's performance in dealing with such cases?

I should tell the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) that, sadly, Leicester is not alone when it comes to the operations of the Audit Commission. My city was criticised for having a high number of reported rape cases. We, the police and other agencies had actively encouraged women to come forward, and the next thing we knew we were accused of being the rape capital of the south. What on earth is up with an organisation that tries to co-ordinate an approach to certain issues but fails to understand the simple basics? If we encourage and give support to women to come forward and report rapes or attempted rapes, that will push the number—or the indices—of reported rape cases up. The commission failed to understand that.

The hon. Member for Leicester, South is dead right to criticise the Audit Commission's understanding of the background to many of its statistics. It beggars belief that an agency that has so much clout, and that the Government listen to, is allowed to get away with such statements—

Bob Russell: Not accountable.

Mr. Hancock: My hon. Friend—not for the first time—makes the important point that the commission is not accountable, and it is about time it was.

My final point is a bit of sour grapes, from my point of view, and concerns the England 2018 World cup bid. My city enthusiastically got behind the campaign and supported it to such an extent that we set up a team and invested close to £250,000. But when it came to the crunch—make-your-mind-up time—the appalling behaviour of FIFA, the Football Association and, to a lesser extent, the Government persuaded the city council not to pursue its bid to be a host city.

I was disappointed, yet I too voted to abandon the bid. We would have ended up needing an on-paper potential outlay of £24 million, perhaps more, with little or no evidence that any of the return on it would come back to us. Even before we could be selected, we were asked to sign a contract on 26 November that suggested that we would have to pay another £250,000 to the FA for its marketing bid. Members will have seen some of the FA's expenditure, such as buying expensive luggage and other gifts to bribe people to vote for us. We were also told that we would have to provide the finance for one person to spend 36 days in South Africa as an active part of the campaign team.

We were told that if we were successful, we would be expected to do an awful lot of things, including guaranteeing a stadium for the games to be played in. The football club in Portsmouth desperately needs a new stadium, but it could not give a cast-iron assurance. The city council was told that if it wanted to make this bid, it

had to guarantee the stadium or it would have to compensate FIFA for another city's having to take on the responsibilities that Portsmouth could not. We were already being told that if we had a new stadium in Portsmouth, built by the club, we would have to put £6 million of council tax payers' money into it to increase its capacity to meet FIFA's standards, with no guarantee that we would get any gain, or even any kudos, from it.

We were told that we would have to ban all existing advertising, for the duration of the competition, for 1 km around the stadium and 1 km around the fans area. We would have to pay compensation to everybody who now displays adverts in those areas. No one within that zone would have been allowed to sell food or beverages, either, because FIFA had made its own arrangements for food and beverage deals around the ground.

We were originally told that if we signed that contract we could get between 10 and 15 per cent. of the gate receipts of all the 64 games that would be played in England during the world cup competition. Then we were told, "No, we've changed our minds. You'll get between 10 and 15 per cent. of the receipts that your ground gets for games played there." Then that changed too, and we were told, "No, you'll get whatever they choose to pay you after they've taken out all their costs, because in effect, FIFA is hiring the ground."

It was a complete and utter fiasco. The FA wrote to the city council on 18 November, giving even more conditions. We were advised by lawyers that it would be helpful if we put money aside for a judicial review of the legality of signing such a one-sided contract. When we sought the Government's assistance and asked them to step in on behalf of all 16 local authorities that were bidding at that stage, they turned their back on us. They said, "It's down to you, but be careful what you sign."

I hope that the 2018 World cup bid is a success for the UK, but for local authorities it could be one of the biggest financial disasters ever to befall them. The city of Portsmouth made a wise decision to get out before we were too far committed. It is a sad reflection on FIFA, the FA and the Government that they treat our national game in such a disrespectful way—and FIFA in particular have a lot of questions to answer.

4.36 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): I had not intended to begin by saying anything about the Royal Navy, but the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) raised the subject and kindly let me intervene, so I shall just say that the Government can be criticised about plenty of things in connection with the Royal Navy, such as the reduction in the number of frigates and destroyers. That number has been reduced from 35 to 23 and, by some counts, to as few as 19.

In addition, the number of nuclear-powered attack submarines has been cut from 12 to seven. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South referred to the date when the carriers will come into service, but it was revealed only yesterday that that was postponed to enable a temporary saving of some £600 million, but that the cost of the postponement will be £1.1 billion later on.

It is a dire situation indeed, but I think that I can reassure the hon. Gentleman, his constituents and supporters of the Royal Navy. After the next general election—when, as I trust, there will be a change of government—I shall be very surprised indeed to find that the contracts for the carriers have not been drawn up with sufficient rigour and comprehensiveness to ensure that the classic strategic argument that always convinces a Treasury team that a vital military asset must be bought, will come into play. That argument is, of course, that it would cost more to cancel the carriers than it would to proceed with them.

Mr. Hancock *indicated assent.*

Dr. Lewis: I am glad to see that the hon. Gentleman is nodding. He is right to make criticisms, but he should not fly the kite of suggesting that the carriers will not happen. I shall be amazed if the carriers do not happen, whatever else we have reason to criticise this Government for in respect of the Royal Navy.

At Christmas-time, we think about the people whom we have lost. We think also about the people whom other people have lost, and in particular of the service personnel who have been lost this year. I think in particular of Olaf Schmid, and I wait with interest to see what posthumous gallantry award he will be given—it should come sooner rather than later—for the magnificent bomb disposal work that he did. The courage and dignity shown by his widow Christina were an example to us all. It is an example that none us would probably be able to follow if, heaven forbid, we were placed in such a situation, but it is one that we as a House can admire and acknowledge, and of which we can stand in awe.

I think of two people whom I have lost in the course of the past year. One was my cold war comrade and friend George Miller—or George Miller-Kurakin, to give him his full inherited name. He died on 23 October, aged just 54. I am grateful to the obituaries editor of *The Independent*, who gave him pride of place with a half-page obituary that I had written, spelling out some of the work that George did to help NATO remain strong while he waited for Russia—his country of descent, shall we say?—to see the back of communism. He was an inspirational figure, and I was glad also that *The Daily Telegraph* similarly accorded him a half-page tribute written by Harry Phibbs, who was part of George's network of couriers, who also did so much to keep the flame of freedom alive in Russia. George died too young, but among those who knew him and among those who have a dim perception of some of the work that went on below the surface to undermine Soviet communism, he will be honoured as a hero.

The other person whom I lost was my father, Samuel Lewis, who died at exactly this time last year. He died on 16 December at the great age of 95. On the day he died, I spoke in a debate, because I had undertaken to do so, and I am glad to find myself speaking again on the first anniversary of his passing. The best tribute that I can give to a man who worked as a tailor for 71 years and who, like my friend George Miller, never earned any real money, is to go on doing the work that I know he was proud to see me engaged in.

I well remember being sworn in to serve in the House in 1997. My father was 84 and sitting in the Gallery. I mentioned that to Speaker Boothroyd. She said to me, "Well, I think we'll make an exception. Normally we are not supposed to pay any attention to anyone outside the

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

boundaries of the Chamber, but as this is a special occasion, let's give him a wave." So Speaker Boothroyd and I made that little gesture to my dad, and I know he was very touched and satisfied by it.

Both George and Sam—George with his too short life and Sam with his very long life—had one great benefit: almost till the end, they kept full command of their faculties. My father's short-term memory was shot, but right up until the day he died, he was still very much himself. What I want to talk about in this short contribution to the debate is what happens when one's faculties and one's personality are affected by illness—mental illness—at too early an age.

I have spoken in Adjournment debates and in Westminster Hall debates recently about the activities of the Hampshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust in respect of the supposedly temporary closure of the psychiatric intensive care unit at Woodhaven hospital in my constituency. It is called Ellingham ward and it provides a vital service. It has been "temporarily" closed and a specialist team has been dispersed. I intend to continue in the months and, hopefully, years ahead, if the general election gives me another mandate to do so, to campaign and fight to make sure that that ward is not lost.

As a result of that campaign, I have been contacted by people who were involved in another specialist unit, known as the student mental health team. It was operated by the Southampton City primary care trust for the benefit of students in Southampton and Solent universities. Those include a number of my constituents. In a nutshell, that specialist team was set up in 1997 and did valuable work saving young lives for a decade, but after those 10 years it was decided by the Southampton City PCT and the Hampshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, which provides the adult mental health services for the whole of our area, that it would be better to transfer the team from the one to the other. It was alleged and assured at the time that nothing really would change. However, not long after the transfer, we find that the team has been dismantled and its personnel have been, for the most part, made redundant. The students have lost an important service and a lifeline.

The point about the student mental health team is that students went to see them as a secondary care service. In other words, the students were pretty ill—in danger of overdosing or doing other things that might lead to suicide. As one member of the team said, they dealt with complex, serious stuff: students with bipolar syndrome or manic depression, psychosis—students in crisis. There were five therapists plus an administrator.

The measure of the seriousness of the team's work comes from the document that the Southampton City primary care trust and the Hampshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust produced when the service was transferred from one to the other. The document stated:

"The Student Mental Health Service is a very dynamic and experienced team who undertake complex and specialised clinical work. The team consist of highly skilled practitioners... Since its inception the student mental health service has seen a significant growth in the number of students seen with severe and enduring mental health problems including personality disorders, psychosis, bipolar disorder, OCD"—

obsessive compulsive disorder—

"eating disorders, self-injurious behaviours and"—

I cannot stress these words too much—

"high risk cases including clients with active suicidal behaviours."

The document continued, stating that

"this is a good time for the Student Mental Health Service to move to the Hampshire Partnership Trust as provider of the service. It will enable the integration of the Student Mental Health Service as a discrete specialist service"—

a separate specialist service—

"within the totality of the Mental Health Provision in Southampton."

As a result of that, the document also referred to the people who are seen as those who suffer from

"severe and complex Mental Health problems".

All that makes it absolutely clear that the service was for young people who were seriously ill. However, I have, as always, given the Hampshire Partnership trust an opportunity to explain why it has done what it has done, and Mr. Nick Yeo, the head of the trust, said that it was

"part of a new development"

to set up a scheme called IAPT, or improving access to psychological therapies. IAPT, the letter states,

"is a therapy based service aimed at providing for the adult population, including students of Southampton...covering steps 2/3 of the stepped care approach,"

which I will explain in a moment. Mr. Yeo went on to say that the service was put out to tender, Dorset Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust won and it is now a matter for that organisation. The trouble with all that, however, is that the student service never was a step 3 service. A step 3 service is for people with moderate to mild mental health problems, but the student service was at least a step 4 service, which is for moderate to severe and complex mental health problems where serious interventions are necessary and there is a serious risk to life.

The service was transferred from one provider to another and eventually ended up with the Dorset trust, which supplies the new service called IAPT. However, IAPT, as it has been explained to me, is only a primary care service for people with basic anxiety and depression; it is not geared for complex and serious cases. The students will therefore have to take their chance with the ordinary community mental health care teams who go out in general for people with severe problems in society; there will be no specialist treatment for students whatever. The trouble is that that service, which is not supplied by the Dorset trust but continues to be supplied by the Hampshire trust, is already bursting at the seams. Yet all the students who used to go to the student service were people who were so ill that it is beyond doubt that they would never have been accepted for the IAPT service that has now been transferred to Dorset.

In effect, what has happened is the destruction of a specialised service for seriously ill young people in the Southampton area. At the time when the service was set up, it was said that it was intended for severely ill people. It has been transferred out of existence by being merged with a service that is not for severely mentally ill people, with the result that four of the five therapists have been made redundant. The effect of that is disastrous. Those who self-harm, those who are suicidal, and those who suffer from enduring mental health problems will not get a service. It has been closure by the back door;

nobody has noticed it or understood it because it has been a process of institutional manoeuvring and covert destruction.

I am sorry to have brought up such a grim subject at what should be a happy time of the year, but I hope that by my doing so the media in the Southampton area will take an interest and young lives will be saved that would otherwise be lost.

4.51 pm

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): It is, as ever, a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). This is an opportunity for me to raise two important issues, one substantive and one slightly less so.

I begin with my grave misgivings about the proposals by the Ministry of Justice and the chief executive of the Land Registry, the chief land registrar, to close five Land Registry offices in the so-called greater south-east. Bizarrely, that includes the loss by compulsory redundancy of 302 jobs in Peterborough by September 2011—a timetable that may preclude my constituents, if they are made compulsorily redundant, from receiving as advantageous severance payments as people doing equal jobs in three other Land Registry offices.

Last month, I had the opportunity to speak to the chief land registrar, Peter Collis. I also had a round-table meeting with a couple of dozen members of staff in the Peterborough office, at Touthill close in the city centre, on 25 November. There is significant concern about the evidential basis that is being used by the Land Registry in putting forward the business case that was published by Ministers on 22 October 2009. The former chief land registrar, John Manthorpe, has prepared a detailed document called the accelerated transformation programme, which I commend to the House. That document puts a very different slant on the information provided by the Land Registry. Mr. Manthorpe—who is, incidentally, a gentleman who served with distinction in his position from 1985 to 1996—has described the plans for closures as

"quite disproportionate and unnecessarily expensive",

based as they are on the historically low level of property and mortgage market activity. I will focus my remarks on the implications for the Land Registry office in Peterborough; no doubt other hon. Members will argue the case for their own Land Registry offices in Stevenage, Portsmouth, Croydon and Tunbridge Wells. Mr. Manthorpe has provided those Members with his detailed rebuttal document.

The current proposals pay no heed to the long-term experience of the staff at the Peterborough Land Registry office who are to be forced to accept compulsory redundancy, at considerable cost to the public purse. Under Mr. Manthorpe's alternative plan, all 19 current offices would remain open, with a continuation of the natural wastage programme through retirements, resignations and transfers to other Government offices and departments such as Jobcentre Plus and English Nature in the city, plus the continuance of the highly successful voluntary severance scheme, and the sale and lease of surplus office capacity across the entire Land Registry estate nationally.

At present, the Land Registry business case bizarrely advocates the recruitment of 594 new, inexperienced staff across the 12 retained offices post-2011, but the removal of 1,500 experienced, dedicated and skilled staff by compulsory redundancy at a cost to the Exchequer of £186 million. Those plans do not stand up to scrutiny and are wrong-headed, short-sighted and flawed, as I will demonstrate with particular reference to premises, staffing, the implications of the Lyons review and the economic impact on the city of Peterborough.

We all accept that the building occupied by the Peterborough Land Registry office is too big and expensive for the staff complement currently occupying it, and the Government must of course address issues of cost and surplus estate. However, there is capacity to let the excess space to other Departments such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The lease expires in 2013 and will need to be paid whether or not the building is occupied after 2011. Early surrender of the lease would be at a premium.

Valuation Office Agency data show that in rental terms, Peterborough is significantly less expensive than many other localities. Headline rental values are £125 per square metre in the city, compared with £145 in Leicester, £150 in Nottingham, £240 in Croydon and more than £1,000 in central London. There is no reason why the Peterborough office would not be able to move to alternative, smaller rental premises in the city on the expiry of the lease in 2013.

Peterborough city council and the East of England regional assembly published a study in August 2004 that maintained that it was an ideal location for civil servants locating out of London and the south-east under the auspices of the 2004 Lyons review. The case for maintaining an office in Peterborough is that it would be considerably cheaper than maintaining one in London, and the office in Peterborough already has the necessary IT, telephone and furniture requirements for such a relocation. In the view of the property consultancy King Sturge, in its report for Sir Michael Lyons, and according to the Lyons review and the Office of Government Commerce guidance, it makes sense for the head office functions to be located in the existing Peterborough office. That would reduce the Land Registry's underlying cost base. The Peterborough building is leased and there is no capital asset value to be unlocked, and it would otherwise be a continuing drain on resources through redundancy payments. We are talking about people's jobs, including older workers who have shown dedication and loyalty over the years to this important work. It is about human capital and human resources, and especially lawyer resources. Lawyers are extremely expensive for the Land Registry to recruit and train.

In short, the Lyons review has been interpreted wrongly in the Land Registry's business case. It can be argued that in order to comply with the review, it is not necessary to close the Peterborough office. It is wrong to allocate a so-called red marking to the office to suggest that it is non-compliant with the Lyons agenda. By that I mean that Peterborough has been allocated a position as part of the greater south-east, but it is not Oxford, Milton Keynes, Hampshire or Kent. It is on the border with the east midlands, in the eastern region. It is not in the greater south-east, and there was a misapprehension about that in the decision taken and the case made for closure. I am glad that the hon. Member for Leicester,

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South (Sir Peter Soulsby) is no longer in his place, because if the criteria had been correctly applied, both the Nottingham and Leicester offices would have been deemed more suitable for closure than Peterborough. The case for closing Peterborough in preference to other offices has not been correctly made.

The closure of the Peterborough Land Registry office will have a significant impact. I will be presumptuous enough to speak for my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara), who is my neighbour. Many of his constituents will be affected, and no doubt he will add his own words in his closing remarks. Of all the proposed office closures, the Peterborough one will cause the greatest pain to staff, due to the limited employment prospects in comparable work in the city, with no capital gain to the organisation.

It is understood that advice was sought by the accelerated transformation programme team on the basis of socio-economic profiling of the areas that currently have a Land Registry presence and with reference to the Government's regeneration framework, to which all Departments are signed up and which OGC is keen to see applied in decisions on the location of Government agencies. Although it is apparent from DCLG advice that the level of deprivation in Peterborough is not the same as that in Hull or Birkenhead, the local economy and job market should be carefully considered. Peterborough is a city with significant areas of deprivation. One area, Dogsthorpe ward, is among the most deprived in England, some other parts of the city are within the 3 per cent. most deprived and a further seven are deemed to have high levels of deprivation.

The east of England region may be seen on some indexes as comparatively affluent, but it is important properly to assess the characteristics of specific locations. Currently, the male unemployment rate in the city of Peterborough is 10.1 per cent. We have seen significant job losses over the past two years, involving companies such as Pearl Assurance, Peterborough city council, Freemans, the catalogues company, Perkins Engines, Norwich and Peterborough building society and Ideal Shopping Direct, the home shopping channel. Others will empathise with the fact that Woolworths and other retail outlets have closed. In short, the social dynamic, and the economic impact and ramifications, have not been taken fully into account when Peterborough has been compared with other parts of the country. A blunt instrument has been used. That is a dismal picture to paint for the dedicated and hard-working Land Registry staff.

I hope that the Minister answers my questions in her winding-up speech, and that she discusses the matter seriously with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, because the proposals do not stand up to scrutiny. They are ill conceived and short-termist, and Ministers should reject them. The people of Peterborough who have given their dedicated service to the Land Registry over the years should be allowed to make their case—it is coherent and cost-neutral to the Exchequer—and to continue their good work.

In the time left to me, I shall raise an important matter that affects only a relatively small number of people, but which is vital to them, their lives and their future prospects. On Saturday, a lady whom I shall call Mrs. W came to my surgery. She is a trained nursery nurse. About three years ago, she worked in a care home. One day in 2006, a lady who worked with her, who was off duty, came into the care home and accused Mrs. W of roughly handling a patient. Mrs. W was immediately reported to the manager and suspended on full pay. She denied roughly handling the elderly patient, but was quite rightly subjected to a proper disciplinary process and took her Unison representative along. Due process was observed and Mrs. W was completely exonerated from the charge of inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour and of roughly handling the lady concerned.

However, the story does not have a happy ending, because a misinterpretation of section 113 of the Police Act 1997 means that the statement made by the then manager of the Bupa facility—I will not name it or say what area of the city it is in—remains in Mrs. W's Criminal Records Bureau records. She subsequently left the facility later in 2006 and trained to be a nursery nurse. However, even though she really wants to do that job, she has been unable to secure employment because no one will take a chance after they have seen the statement in the CRB record.

It is in the gift of the chief constable of Cambridgeshire to change that statement or remove it completely. Until something is done, that woman cannot secure employment, and it cannot be right that people can be accused of something, completely exonerated and return to work, but when they want to change jobs a sword of Damocles—in the form of a tangential reference—is held over their heads for years to come, blighting their lives. I have another constituent, a schoolmaster, who is in exactly the same position. Rightly, he is very angry and bitter about the aspersions that have been cast on him. In his case, it was disciplining a teenage girl pupil that got him into difficulty. I hope that the Minister will address that issue.

Finally, I wish everyone well, especially my constituents, John and Rosie Sandall, who are travelling to Ukraine for the 26th time in 20 years to take money and presents to needy children whose families suffered in the terrible Chernobyl tragedy in 1986. I also look forward to helping to serve the Christmas dinner, with turkey and all the trimmings, with the Salvation Army at Bourges boulevard in Peterborough on Christmas day to help the needy and elderly of the New England and Millfield areas. I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and all officers and Members of the House a happy Christmas.

5.6 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): Like other hon. Members, I wish to raise local issues, but first I want to talk about an international issue. In 2003, this Parliament voted to invade Iraq. That was an illegal invasion and a disastrous decision. In 2003, I was one of the MPs—as were all of my colleagues—who voted against that invasion. I also came down to London one Sunday shortly before the vote, with my then nine-year-old daughter and 1 million other people, to march outside this building to protest against what was clearly about to happen.

Hans Blix and his team of UN weapons inspectors had spent some months going to more than half—some 60 per cent.—of the sites that the British and US intelligence services had identified as possible sites for

WMD, and they had found nothing. Hans Blix reported that openly and publicly, and he said that if he had another three months, they could finish going to all the sites, but that they expected to find nothing. Instead, of course, we took a different course of action.

Already we are seeing, in the early days of the Chilcot inquiry, evidence confirming the view that many of us had back in 2003 that the flimsy evidence of an Iraqi taxi driver and an online student dissertation was sexed up to make a false case for war. We now have the vision of the Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, appearing on television and admitting openly that he would have taken this country to war anyway, regardless of what case could or could not be made on WMD. But only days before the vote that took us into Iraq, he stood at the Dispatch Box and told this House that if Saddam Hussein and his sons were willing to give up their weapons of mass destruction, they could stay in power. Tony Blair categorically stated that it was not about regime change, but about WMD. How can someone give up WMD that they do not possess because they do not exist?

The Iraq war—a wrong and illegal war—went ahead. It alienated the Muslim world which, only 18 months earlier, had largely rallied around the US after the disgraceful 9/11 attacks. It led to 500,000 to 600,000 people in Iraq dying by UN estimates and up to 1 million dying by other estimates. Bombings continue to wreak havoc in Baghdad and across Iraq, as we saw tragically only a few days ago. Iraq became a recruiting sergeant for international terrorism.

On the other hand, the Afghan war in 2001 was different. The Afghanistan invasion was justified and legal, and as a newly elected MP at the time I argued that case against the Stop the War coalition at a public meeting in Chesterfield. Eighteen months later, I argued at a similar public meeting that the Iraq war was wrong.

Afghanistan was justified because 9/11 had been planned and executed from safe bases there, and of course there had been attacks around the world before 9/11, most notably on the US embassy in Kenya where the American targets were missed and 60 Africans, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, were cold-bloodedly slaughtered. The great majority of the Muslim world rallied around and supported the USA after the disgraceful 9/11 attack, and supported the invasion of Afghanistan.

In general, the coalition troops who went into Afghanistan were welcomed in much of the country as liberators, not just by the Kurds and the Northern Alliance, but in many other parts of the country. But then all attention was taken away from that country and disastrously diverted to the illegal invasion of Iraq—the eye was taken off the ball. Eight years later—almost as long as world war one and world war two put together—the Government say that they will provide enough helicopters and armoured patrol vehicles by next year and train up the Afghan forces to take over from western troops some time in the future.

What on earth have the Government been doing for the past eight years? Why did they not provide enough helicopters at some point over the past eight years? Why did they not provide suitable armoured patrol vehicles over the past eight years? Why did they not embark on a serious, large-scale programme of training up Afghan security forces so that they could do the jobs currently done by western troops over the past eight years? Why have they waited until now to say, "We'll do it for next year"? It is too late. It is eight years too late. If we send our servicemen and women out to risk their lives, they should be properly equipped from the start, not eight or nine years in.

Chesterfield has been relatively lucky so far in that, as far as I know, we have only had one death in the armed forces in Afghanistan. However, others have been injured, some of them disabled for life. The young man who died, Ben Ford, was 19. I was about to call him a young boy because he was exactly the same age as my son. They were in the same year group at the same school, and when my son was 19, I still thought of him—wrongly, I suppose—as a boy. Ben Ford died because his Snatch Land Rover was blown up by an improvised explosive device. Had it been a properly armoured patrol vehicle, he might have survived. Neither did the vehicle have any electronic warfare counter measures—the sort of measures that can intercept the radio signals that set off IEDs from a distance via remote control. Had it been properly equipped, he might have survived.

Military personnel know, when they join the armed forces, that they risk their lives—that is part of the job—but they should be entitled to know that they are being sent with the best equipment possible and for a clearly defined and legal purpose and objective, and that the politicians in charge are fully focused on the endgame that will end the conflict, not that after eight years the Government will suddenly wake up to the drift that has characterised this country's presence in Afghanistan since 2001. It is a drift that has led to unnecessary deaths.

On more local issues, last Wednesday, I and other Derbyshire MPs met a wide-ranging delegation that included the police and fire authorities, and various councils, including Chesterfield borough council and North East Derbyshire, Bolsover and South Derbyshire district councils. They came to lobby us on various issues. Also, this morning, I met the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan) to discuss the chronic underfunding of Chesterfield borough council as a result of the Government's bus fare scheme.

What was the common thread between those two meetings, two weeks apart and covering a range of councils, police and fire authorities, and bus fares? It was that none of that lobbying involved any special pleading. Nobody was asking for something extra or for what other people did not have. Nobody was saying, "Give us something new. Give us more on top." Each lobbying group—whether a council, fire brigade, police authority, Chesterfield borough council or with an interest in bus fares—was saying, "Give us the money that you as a Government say that we should have but will not give to us."

I will provide an explanation, although hon. Members will be familiar with the details. Derbyshire police are underfunded by £5 million a year. It is not the police saying that; it is the Government. However, the Government will not give the police that £5 million a year. The fire service in Derbyshire is less badly affected than the police are, but it is also underfunded. All the councils in Derbyshire, from the district and borough councils up to the county council, are also underfunded, according to the Government's own figures.

[Paul Holmes]

Many hon. Members will be familiar with the f40 campaign, which I was part of as a councillor, long before I was elected as an MP. When the Government were first elected in 1997, the f40 campaign was promised that the problem of shire counties in particular being badly underfunded by the complex formula used to devise central Government funding would be resolved. In 2006, the Government finally revised the funding formula. From 2006, they said, "Yes, you should have more money"—you being the police authority, the fire service or the council—"but you can't have it, because of the floors and ceilings in operation." Derbyshire police, which is the fifth worst funded police force in the country and has hundreds fewer police officers than equivalent shire counties such as Nottinghamshire or Durham, therefore continues to suffer.

In 2008, the Government introduced an excellent national bus fare scheme, which is of great value in enhancing older people's lives, but they failed to fund it properly for around 30 of the 263 authorities that were involved. At first the Government just denied that there was a problem, although I am pleased to say that the meeting that I had this morning with the Transport Minister was much more positive than the one that I had last year with his predecessor. Last year the Government denied that there was a problem; this year they have accepted that there is one. They are proposing to give Chesterfield borough council and the other 30 authorities that have been badly hit their money for next year, from 1 April 2010, although that is not a guarantee, because other councils that were given too much money are complaining bitterly that they do not want that money taken away from them.

How do councils deal with that general situation, involving the police, the fire service, bus fares, council funding and so on, when 75 per cent. of funding for local authorities basically comes from the Government grant, not the local council tax? Most local voters simply do not understand that. How do local authorities deal with things when the direction on how to spend most of that money comes from central Government, rather than from local decision taking? Local voters just do not understand that. If the Government refuse to pay up, as they have in all the cases that I have mentioned, what can the local authority do?

In Surrey, where the police force was in the same situation with its funding, the decision was made to increase the council tax by more than the recommended level. There was a wide consultation with the public and businesses, who said, "Yes, we'd rather increase the council tax than have fewer police on the beat," and as a result a cap was introduced.

Derbyshire police force has gone down the same route, consulting widely and receiving overwhelming feedback from across Derbyshire saying, "Yes, we'd rather pay more council tax than cut our police force," which is already the fifth worst funded in the country. However, the Government have said, "No, you can't take that decision. We don't care what local people, local councils or the police force say in Derbyshire; we're going to underfund you. And, to rub your nose in it, we're going to cap you." That means that Derbyshire is facing the loss of front-line police officers next year, when it is already one of the lowest staffed forces in the country, albeit a very efficient one.

In the short term, the Government should solve the problem by providing the money that they say those councils should have for those services, but which they will not provide them with. In the longer term, but not after too long—this should happen as soon as the next general election is over—the next Government should reverse the whole system. We are so centralised that 90 per cent. of the taxation raised is taken to London and then handed out with strings attached. The Government in London try to micro-manage everything that councils do and everything that schools do, through Ofsted, league tables and the national curriculum.

That should be reversed, and it is not what happens in the rest of the western world. It does not happen anywhere else in Europe, apart from Malta, which is a small island and can be excused, nor does it happen in Canada, the USA or Australia. As with proportional representation, we are the odd ones out. So the rest of the world has got it wrong and we have got it right? I do not think so. The Government should change the system to the benefit of democracy in this country—and, for that matter, for more efficient local government.

The hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) mentioned the Oneplace reports that are online. From the sounds of it, the report for Chesterfield was much more optimistic than the one for Leicester, but two things in it stood out. The first was that, in talking about the problems facing Chesterfield borough council, which was praised for its work on boosting the open-air market, attracting employers, bucking the recession to some extent and doing a grand job in all sorts of ways, the report pointed out—over and over, on the first five of the nine pages in the report—that the council faces a huge problem because of the underfunding of bus fares. Last year and this year, 11 per cent. of the council's budget was diverted not into anything to do with the borough council, but into paying for the Government's underfunded scheme. I hope that the Government will rectify that next year, but there is no mention at all of paying back the £3.5 million that has been taken away in the past two years, much to the detriment of Chesterfield services.

The report states:

"Councillors must decide soon where to get the necessary investment of around £43.8 million to bring its council houses up to the required standard".

Where indeed? The Government will not provide that money. They will not give back the rent, the right-to-buy money or the money that they have taken away from Chesterfield over the years to pay housing benefits and to build the Olympic infrastructure in London. They are not going to give any of that back, so where is the money to come from?

The council could go to an arm's-length management organisation, which is one of the Government's options, but the ALMOs are now being told that they cannot have any money either. The only option is complete privatisation, by handing housing over to the housing associations. As with nearly half the councils around the country, however, 70 per cent. of the people of Chesterfield have said no to privatisation. What is the council to do in the face of policies from a Government who say, "If you don't privatise and transfer out, we will effectively starve you out by taking money away from your council rents and not allowing you to maintain your stock in the way that the people of Chesterfield want"?

5.20 pm

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I want to talk about several matters affecting my constituents on which there have been recent decisions, reviews or consultations. If I have time, I want to cover student funding, the outcome of the Walker review on water metering and charging, and capital funding for schools and housing.

Before I turn to those matters, however, I want to talk about Efford, the community in my constituency that I mentioned at Prime Minister's questions today. As I said then, that community has been strong and resilient in the face of six months of very distressing press coverage about the nursery worker who was given an indeterminate sentence yesterday for her horrible crimes against children at Little Ted's nursery in my constituency. Like most of my constituents, I am pleased that she was given an indeterminate sentence. The tariff for crimes of this nature simply does not deal with people's feelings of disgust, anger, loathing and incomprehension at such an unbelievable breach of trust, and such evil behaviour.

Every Member of the House faces the difficult job of explaining why judges and sentencing are independent of the role of MPs, and also distanced from the Government and Ministers. Democracy and the rule of law demand that that be so, and anyone who stops to think about it can see why that is the case. No one would want politicians to be able to interfere with sentencing. As a female colleague said to me earlier today, that would set us on the road to becoming a banana republic. In the context of what has happened in Efford, however, it is sometimes difficult to deal with people's deep-seated anger and the emotions that are aroused by these events, and it is not easy to explain the rather dry subject of the Sentencing Guidelines Council.

There is one thing that I can do, however. That is to commit myself to making it a top priority to ensure that the serious case review, which will produce its conclusions in the next month or two, learns lessons from this situation, for the sake not only of the 100 or more families in Efford who have suffered over the past six months, but of every parent in this country who wants to ensure that nursery care is of a high quality. The review has already been at work for several months, and its findings have been delayed to ensure that the views of the affected families could be taken into account. It was right to delay it, because serious case reviews benefit hugely if the experience of close family members are taken into account.

Efford is a strong and resilient community. It has at its heart the Heart of Efford Community Partnership, and I want to pay tribute in particular to its chair, Kath Hancock, who has done amazing work over the past six months in providing a link between the people of Efford and the public services.

The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr. Jackson) just mentioned the Oneplace assessment. In fact, Plymouth has received one of the few green flags handed out for the way in which it has handled several crises, this most recent crisis being one of them.

I am really pleased that there is to be a new primary school in Efford; no community could deserve it more. The two schools of Highfield and Plym View have come together as High View in one of the old premises while the new one is built. Last week I attended the nativity play there, and I wish I could have bottled and taken away the energy and the confidence of those young children. They gave a very professional performance, many of them good enough to appear in musicals on the London stage; it was a real tonic to be able to share that with them. Incidentally, I was lobbied by a member of the school council about getting some funding to visit Parliament and see how it works. I hope that we can arrange that next year. It was also very good to be able to welcome the Thames Gardens and Horseshoe residents associations here in Parliament earlier this week.

I now want to deal with student fees. The Government promised that the current policy on tuition fees and funding would be reviewed after the first cohort of students studying under the system had graduated. That means now. The timing ensures that, far from anyone sneaking things through, this issue will be very much in the spotlight as we approach the next election. When the National Union of Students recently lobbied us, they presented me, and, I suspect, other Members with large student communities, with a copy of "Funding Our Future"—a blueprint with some really interesting ideas in it. I instinctively like the idea of having a trust, which they put forward, although I have a range of questions, particularly about the costings and whether the proposals will take into account the position of women, who seem to me to be better taken care of under the present arrangements than under the proposed new ones. I am open-minded about suggestions at this stage; I recently met some of my local university of Plymouth student union officers, and I hope to meet others to discuss the matter.

At the time when fees were introduced, I was interested in the graduate tax approach to dealing with student funding, and I am pleased that the Government review is wide and will, I hope, be able to look at the proposals being made. I would love to see stronger student representation on the review panel; the National Union of Students is making a case for that. There is a student representative, albeit not one in which it has total confidence, and I think that that representation could do with some strengthening.

I am pleased that there has been a 67.3 per cent. increase in the number of students going to university over the past 10 years—435 from my constituency this year, compared with 260 in 1997. It is an important debate to have, as we must continue to find a way to support and fund our higher education institutions. Although I am delighted that so many young people are now able to access higher education and have the qualifications to do so, we must also ensure that the higher education institutions have the funding that they need to maintain their high standards of tuition. The UK, of course, has—or at least, had until recently—23 of the world's top 100 universities. I attended a breakfast briefing, which discussed the challenges faced in some of the devolved areas where universities with a different set of student funding arrangements are struggling to keep up with the funding they need to maintain their position in the global league tables.

Similarly, we must ensure that other forms of student support are adequately funded and resourced, as highlighted by the recent problems with handling student finance applications. None of this comes cheaply, and it is important to remember that more public money is

[Linda Gilroy]

spent on universities than on any other level of education, with some three quarters of the cost of higher education borne by the taxpayer. I am lobbied for better funding by representatives of pre-school, primary and secondary education as well as further education—and that is, of course, only the education sector.

I believe that the United Kingdom university system represents good value for money when our fees are compared with university fees internationally. Those of us who from time to time have American interns passing through our offices know that the costs in America are amazing compared with ours, although it goes without saying that I am not suggesting that we want the United Kingdom system to become like the American one. We should bear in mind that there has been a large increase in the number of students applying for part-time or shorter courses, and that those students may include people with families to look after.

Apart from climate change, perhaps our biggest challenge for the future is the skills race. We need to maintain our excellence in those fields. Fewer jobs will be manual or unskilled. If Britain is to remain competitive in the world economy, the development of a skilled and highly trained professional work force is key. For every five manual jobs today, there will be only one in 2020. Further education has a vital role to play in the development of vocational skills, along with renewed emphasis on apprenticeships and, of course, business funding.

I am pleased that the final report of the Walker review has at long last been published. I am also pleased that, having examined the economic, social and geographical circumstances of the South West Water area, the review team has concluded that current bills in the south-west relate to the poor state of the sewerage assets at the time of privatisation, and that 20 years ago—as many of us have said for a long time—the Conservative privatisation was badly botched. To address the root cause directly would need a specific one-off adjustment of £650 million, or annual transfers funded either by Government or by other water customers across the country. None of that will be easy to achieve. Anna Walker suggests that Ofwat would be best placed to consider the options for implementing either a one-off or another kind of adjustment, and advising Ministers accordingly.

Last week I met the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies). I am pleased to say that he has wasted no time in asking Ofwat to investigate Anna Walker's proposals and report to him. He has been very helpful both to me and to other Members of Parliament from Devon and Cornwall—predominantly Liberal Democrats, but also my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck)—who have campaigned relentlessly throughout this and previous Parliaments.

The Government's recent decision to give the go-ahead for Plymouth to spend £78 million through the Building Schools for the Future programme on secondary schools and to upgrade ICT equipment has been very welcome. We were originally to receive it in five years' time, but I campaigned, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport—and we were pleased that our case was recognised following a visit from the Minister for Schools and Learners earlier this year.

The decision is a real boost for the whole community. Good schools not only shape the future of our children but help everyone in the locality, and the jobs involved in the building work will be very welcome too. This is exactly the sort of news that it is good to receive just before Christmas. Tamarside community college will have 50 to 70 per cent. new build, Lipson community college will have 20 to 50 per cent. new build, Stoke Damerel college in my constituency will have 100 per cent. new build, John Kitto community college will have 50 to 70 per cent. new build,, and Sir John Hunt community college will have a major ITC programme. All that is very welcome.

We heard today that the Minister for Housing had shortlisted the Redrow Vision housing scheme in Devonport for a Kickstart grant of just under £3 million. That comes after funding was agreed a few weeks ago for Kerr street in Devonport and Cargo in Millbay. That is a real tonic for jobs in the city. Although 50 per cent. of the funding must be paid back to the Government, developers will have the cash that they need to get sites up and running again. There will be a rigorous final check before the final go-ahead, but 22,500 houses will be built nationally as a result of this Labour Government's investment. We will continue to invest through the downturn, in order to secure both homes and jobs.

Within the last hour, we have learned of one final tonic: Plymouth has been chosen as one of the host cities in England's 2018 World cup bid. If the bid is successful, that will bring huge opportunities, not only by promoting the strong tourist attractions of our city, but in terms of jobs and getting young people involved in the sport of football. I hope Members on both sides of the House, and people throughout the country, will join me in hoping that England's bid to host that World cup is successful.

5.36 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): May I begin by adding my tribute to those who have been killed or wounded on active service in Afghanistan? My thoughts and sympathies are especially with the families who for the first time this Christmas will miss their loved ones. I think in particular of the family of Lance Corporal Richard Brandon, whose funeral was on 2 October, and at which his partner and fiancée moved us all to tears with her amazingly composed and courageous tribute to that serving soldier.

Having said that, the main purpose of my contribution this afternoon is to ask the Deputy Leader of the House to convey my serious concerns about the future of and what is happening at a school in my constituency. Baxter college in Kidderminster has been labelled a national challenge school without considered justification, and with potentially dire consequences. A consultation on replacing the college with a national challenge trust school has recently ended and a decision is due before Christmas, which is why a message must urgently be got through to the Minister for Schools and Learners.

To my knowledge, the school has an impressive history. I visited it first as an MP in 2001, when it was called the Harry Cheshire high school, and I was appalled. The graffiti, the behaviour of the kids, the untidy classrooms and the rowdyism were all unacceptable. The local authority spotted what was going on and did several things to improve it. First, it changed its name. Richard Baxter was a cleric in the 1600s who spent much of his

time working in Kidderminster, and he was one of the earliest and most influential non-conformists—a very famous person, therefore, to lend his name to the school. The local authority also brought in an inspirational head teacher from elsewhere, who brought with him some expert teachers, and together the staff, the governors and the head have turned the school around. It is now a joy to walk around it: it is tidy, with no graffiti, and the behaviour is excellent. In the classes, there is an atmosphere of friendship, co-operation and learning.

On the filing cabinet in the headmaster's office are the following words:

"Passion, flexibility, camaraderie, integrity and kindness."

That is exactly what the school exemplifies. He has increased the number of pupils from just over 400 to more than 1,000, and the sixth-form cohort from just 23 to 150. The proportion of five grade A* to C GCSEs achieved when he took over the school in 2003 was 13 per cent. By 2007, he had increased that to 54 per cent. The letters that I was receiving from parents pleading that they should not have to send their children to this failing school have completely stopped; people are now pleased that their children go there. Ofsted rates the school as satisfactory, and it has received awards from Investors in People and the national training centre of excellence.

Significantly, with six other secondary schools in my area and with Kidderminster college, Baxter college is a member of a new trust that started on 1 September 2008—the ContinU trust. People are amazed that that possibly unique example of co-operation between eight educational establishments allows them to share their services and to build up their expertise in one thing and share it across all the senior pupils in my area. When I walked past Kidderminster college recently, I noticed a sign saying, "ContinU transport pick-up point". The trust even has transport to take the students between these schools to receive their specialist lessons. Secondary education is developing with co-operation between the schools and the college in my area.

However, when I made a routine visit on 23 October to see the head of Baxter college—this was not at his request—I was staggered to see that he was not his usual bright, cheerful self. He gave me the news that not only had the college been labelled a national challenge school, because of one slip—I will explain why the results declined for that one year—but that there was a proposal to push it into a national challenge trust. That would mean that it would be abolished in name and would become a trust with another school. At first sight, that appeared to be cut and dried, and hard to contest, but nobody at government level appreciates exactly what the new head, staff and governors have done—as I have said, the improvement in the school has been staggering. I am not criticising the chief executive of the county council or its director of children's services, because they are both relatively new appointments and they did not know what the school was like before all this happened. However, the proposal is an absolute kick in the teeth for the head, the governors, the staff and the pupils, who have transformed the school. Even worse, this inspirational head has been taken by the same education authority to pull round schools in other parts of the county, and he has done so successfully.

I come to the reasons for the blip. A review of education in Wyre Forest took us from a three-tier system to a two-tier one. In the first year of the new system, Baxter college had two years of children coming from five feeder schools, three of which are among the worst performing locally because of the deprivation of the area in which they are situated. Thus, Baxter college suddenly had to absorb 11 to 13-year-olds largely from poorly achieving schools. In addition, there was a tremendous shortage of maths teachers. Despite all those problems, this year the college has done well in A* to C GCSE results, including in English and Maths, and has got over these issues.

However, the college is still being forced into the educational trust. That has had a devastating effect on morale, staff and pupils, and governors have been sacked. There has also been an effect on prospective parents; I will again get letters from people who do not want their children to go to the school just because it has been labelled as "failing" in this way. Very significant is the effect on the ContinU trust, which, as I have said, is unique in its success. The school is being taken out of that trust, so it will no longer be co-operating in the same way.

There are even rumours and allegations that the school has been forced into this national challenge trust because of the effect, in some way, on the Building Schools for the Future programme—I do not know whether that is significant. I wrote to the Minister for Schools and Learners on 26 October to express my concern, and I also submitted my response to the consultation. I had a reply on 17 November, accepting my concerns but not offering any particular action or help. On 25 November, eight days later, I was staggered to receive a letter from the same Minister, giving me the news that the school would become a national challenge trust school, and asking: was I not delighted that it was going to be transferred into that form? The letter concluded:

"I am sure you will be delighted about this new development for Wyre Forest."

I have never been a Minister, and I do not see many prospects of my becoming one, but I would have thought that even if the Minister could not remember that particular example, at least some of his staff would have realised that one cannot write to an MP only eight days after the last letter, congratulating him on something that he obviously deplored. I was very cross to read that. I have written back to the Minister and have not had a reply.

My aim in raising these issues after the consultation has ended but before the decision is made is to appeal to the Department to reconsider what the head, staff, governors and students have achieved and the consequences if the school is abolished and becomes a national challenge trust school—and even to consider reversing the proposal.

Mr. Pelling: What are my hon. Friend's expectations as regards the disruption to students' learning from these changes?

Dr. Richard Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Any major change, particularly one affecting the morale of teaching staff and of other children, can have a disastrous effect. The college is being paired with a school in a village in another part of Worcestershire. I cannot see that the staff and the governors there have the same experience of coping with a school that takes children from disadvantaged areas.

[Dr. Richard Taylor]

Let me finish with some of the usual messages. I am very concerned for the children who visit my patch, because they go on the Severn Valley railway and meet Father Christmas, and they go to the safari park to see the white lion cubs and they meet Father Christmas. What do children think about Father Christmas these days when they can meet him everywhere they go?

I started my education right on the top of Ilkley moor and the temperature today reminds me of what it was like at my prep school. Those who were listening to the "Today" programme two or three days ago will have heard that the marvellous carol, "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night", can be sung to the tune of "On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at". Earlier on, before you took the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) threatened to play her mobile phone ring tone, with the tune from "Lakmé" which is, I think, something to do with British Airways. Until she did that, I was almost tempted to ask whether we could have a go at singing "While Shepherds Watched" to "On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at", but I am sure that you would not approve of that. When hon. Members go home to carol services, it is worth asking whether they can have that tune.

I conclude by wishing a happy Christmas and a happy new year to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, your staff, other hon. Members and, in particular, the staff who look after us in the Terrace cafeteria and—as a Member who does not have a Whip—the marvellous Doorkeepers, who tell me exactly what is going on and when.

5.49 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), and I want to focus my remarks on issues that have been at the forefront of my constituents' concerns over the past year.

Obviously, the recession has been one of the biggest problems that my constituents have faced, and I am sure that the same is true for the constituents of many, if not all, hon. Members. It has had a tremendous impact: I have spent a lot time speaking to local businesses in my constituency, and I continue to be very frustrated by the stories that I hear from viable concerns—the ones with sound order books that would be able to get through the recession if it were not for the threats hanging over them. Those threats include the possibility that their banks might suddenly withdraw credit, or charge huge interest on overdrafts.

Like many hon. Members, I have made many representations to the Chancellor about those threats, but it seems that the Government are unwilling to use their influence, even with those banks in which the state is a major shareholder, to get the banks lending to viable businesses. Some of the companies in my constituency have gone to the wall, with people made redundant as a result, and I would hate to see more viable businesses that could survive the recession having to suffer the same fate.

I have also been dismayed by the result of the recent court case on bank charges, and I know that that sentiment is widely shared. The banks charge punitive fees when a person goes even slightly overdrawn, and those fees compound because they are charged daily. The result is that a person who goes £1 overdrawn can accrue more than £100 in charges in just a few days.

The charges are not related to the cost of processing spontaneous overdrafts, and are just a way to claw back money. In fact, the overdraft charges make up a large proportion of banks' profits, and they are often applied to very vulnerable people. Given the court decision, I would very much like the Government to bring forward legislation to ensure that banks are able only to levy fair charges that relate to the costs of the additional administration work incurred when people go overdrawn.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): My hon. Friend may be aware that the point decided in the Abbey National case was a very narrow one. The Supreme Court gave a clear steer that the Government and Parliament may wish to revisit the matter, and that the Office for Fair Trading could bring proceedings under section 140 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. Would she join me in making that call for early action?

Jo Swinson: I certainly would, and my hon. Friend makes his point very well indeed. This matter is something that requires urgent action, especially in a recession, from the Government and bodies such as the OFT.

I have mentioned redundancy, which has affected many of my constituents, but the fear of unemployment hanging over many people adds to stress and creates problems in the home. It is something that our constituents all face on a regular basis.

On a slightly more positive note, there has been good news on the unemployment figures in my constituency of East Dunbartonshire: a slight drop has been recorded in the past two months. I hope that that is a trend but fear that it may not be, as we all know that unemployment tends to be a lagging indicator in recessions. There could be more pain to come, especially given that there may be future strictures on the public sector.

A great many of my constituents employed in the civil service have been concerned by the proposed changes to the civil service compensation scheme and how their potential compensation if they were made redundant would be altered. I accept that the scheme needs to be amended, but the proposed changes are causing concern about the inequity between different types of workers. I hope that the Government will listen to the representations that are being made, and come forward with amended plans for the scheme.

The recession is hitting savers particularly hard. The low interest rates may be good for those with mortgages, but their effect is quite the opposite for people who rely on interest payments on their savings for their basic, day-to-day living. That is causing problems for many older people in my constituency in particular.

Many of those older people are also victims of the Equitable Life saga. They put their savings into a well respected institution, and I am one of many MPs to be frustrated in our attempts to make progress in this matter. I have called an Adjournment debate on the issue, and I have attended other Adjournment debates on it, including one secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb). In addition, the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) has been very active on the matter, as have hon. Members on both sides of the House through the all-party group on Equitable Life.

It seems that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. There is continual delay, and we know that people with Equitable Life policies are dying before getting the opportunity to receive any possible compensation. I urge the Government to deal with the matter and to recognise that, when they have a parliamentary ombudsman and she has given a firm ruling on the issue, it makes sense that that should be followed.

East Dunbartonshire is often seen as an affluent constituency, but that does not mean that there is no poverty. It is often hidden. Pensioners in particular may live in a large house that has been their family home, but they face difficulties with fuel poverty in trying to heat that home, and with large council tax bills because the council tax system is not related to ability to pay and is very unfair.

We have had concerns for other elderly people in my area who require care at home or who are living in sheltered housing. Like some other local authorities, East Dunbartonshire council has tried to introduce charges for sheltered housing wardens, among other things. Wardens are an essential part of living in such accommodation, which helps people to maintain an independent life for far longer and is much better value than going into more supported accommodation. I know that local authorities will have difficulties balancing the budget during the recession, but I hope that some of the most vulnerable people in our society are not seen as the first port of call for savings. That would be very unjust indeed.

It is sometimes said that all politics is local. There have recently been various controversial local issues in my constituency. The Kilmardinny development is proposed for a piece of land between Milngavie and Bearsden in my constituency. Much of the land, such as the old bus station site, has been derelict for some years, although other parts of it have been used for golf and other purposes. People accept that the land should be developed, and the local council's local plan suggested that 330 houses would be appropriate, but a proposal came forward for 550 houses, which is clear overdevelopment. Despite the proposal being overwhelmingly rejected by the local council more than two years ago, the decision will ultimately be taken by one unelected official, the reporter.

I see other hon. Members nodding. They will have had such experiences in their constituencies. In the case in East Dunbartonshire, the community gain is limited and the traffic improvements will probably only counter the increase in traffic problems that would come from the impact of an additional 550 houses on local roads. The £10 million planning gain for a new local leisure centre does not cover the £17 million cost, at least, of building such a centre. If the reporter recommends that the scheme go ahead under those conditions, the council could be put under pressure to accept a development that would leave it out of pocket.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way; she has had an extremely long day. I saw her very early this morning on television, and she was working late last night. In Wellingborough we have exactly the same issue. People are against the Wellingborough North development, the council is against it, and lo and behold, someone from the Government who knows nothing about it can overturn it. Does she agree that these decisions should be left to local councils?

Jo Swinson: Indeed. We also need some kind of appeals system. I am frustrated by the way the system works at present. It does not serve local interests well when the views of the people who know best—those who represent a local area—are overturned. I firmly believe that the Kilmardinny development as currently proposed should not and must not go ahead.

Elsewhere in my constituency, Tesco, which is well known in the context of planning, has a current application to expand its Milngavie store—to knock down the existing store and more than double it in size, in effect placing one of its Tesco Extra stores, I imagine, right next to the town centre. That is a massive expansion. I have surveyed my constituents on the matter—the 5,500 households affected in the town—and had more than 800 replies. The majority said that the proposed size of the store is far too big, and its location will result in its protruding more than 7 metres above the road, whereas at present it is set below the road and away from it, so it is not an eyesore on the landscape.

As is often the case with large supermarket developments, people are also concerned about the impact on local shops. We are still lucky in Milngavie to have a great range of independent stores, such as a butcher, an ironmonger, a fabulous independent bookshop, confectioners and others. More than doubling the size of a large supermarket in that vicinity could have a very negative impact on those shops. I hope that those concerns will be taken into account when the application is considered, although I must note that, from the experiences of other hon. Members, companies such as Tesco do not necessarily have a great track record when it comes to changing their plans.

In Bishopbriggs, the town centre is also being redeveloped, but again the plans seem to be arranged entirely around creating a Morrisons superstore and a large car park, rather than focused on other aspects that make up a town centre, such as community facilities. In fact, the proposals involve knocking down a sports hall that was built only a few years ago at significant expense—despite a group of volunteers in the community getting together and putting forward a business plan to run the hall for community gain, which is surely something that we should all encourage in our local areas. Nevertheless, that development has not received final approval, either, so I urge developers and the council to take heed of local concerns.

The situation is not all doom and gloom, however, and I should like to share an excellent example of community action in Kirkintilloch in my constituency. In 2003, a group of young people decided that they would like to have a skate park in the town. They got together with like-minded people and lobbied politicians, including me—although in 2003 I was standing for the Scottish Parliament. They lobbied MSPs and the council; they raised funds and managed to secure grants of £500,000; they were involved in community activities such as litter picks and gala days to raise their profile. Just a couple of weeks ago, the skate park opened. It has been well used—a healthy activity whereby young people can socialise and learn mutual respect.

I pay tribute to Susan Murray for driving forward the project, and to Alex Baylis, who is a skater. When he started out on the campaign, he was at school, and in the six years that it has taken to build the park he has gone through university, graduated and set up an

[Jo Swinson]

increasingly successful band called the Acutones. Without those people and many other volunteers, the park would simply not have been possible.

I shall touch on a couple of national issues before concluding. I had hoped to raise the first in Prime Minister's questions, but sadly time sped away and we just missed out on reaching my question on the Order Paper. It is the important issue of body image. Some Members will know that today the Advertising Standards Authority upheld a complaint, made through a campaign website that I co-ordinated, about an advert that had been digitally retouched. The advert was for an Oil of Olay anti-wrinkle cream, and it is clearly misleading for such adverts to retouch wrinkles out of the picture.

I am glad that the ASA upheld that complaint, but there is a wider issue. There is a lot of academic evidence showing that the idealised and heavily retouched images that we see in the media damage the health and self-esteem of not only young people, but people of all ages and both women and men. I should like adverts to be labelled to show the extent to which they have been digitally retouched, and I very much hope to return to the issue in the new year and, possibly, to secure a fuller debate about the subject.

I should also like to mention political reform. We all accept that 2009 has been a somewhat difficult year for politics and democracy. Having had the expenses scandal, the public are understandably quite angry about what has happened, but I am sure that I am not alone in thinking that quite a lot of MPs are quite angry about what has gone on, too. I am sure that many of us were unaware of the extent to which expenses were being used for unexpected purposes. We need to grasp this opportunity to rebuild our politics and to make changes that make our politics much stronger in the long run. We must ensure that we make progress on reform of the House of Lords, for example, and the Prime Minister recently said that he was in favour of votes for 16-year-olds. That is Liberal Democrat party policy, Labour party policy and Scottish National party policy, so let us introduce either an amendment to existing legislation or a short Bill and put it into practice.

There have been private Members' Bills on the right of recall, and there is increasing consensus on the issue. We should make such changes so that, if an MP is found to have done something wrong, their constituents have some power in between elections. They should not have to lump it; they should be able to take action and prompt a by-election. I strongly believe that electoral reform should be back on the agenda, as indeed should reform of this House.

I urge Members to look carefully at the Wright Committee proposals to help to ensure that the agenda of Parliament is set by a cross-party Committee—by Parliament rather than the Government—and that Select Committee Chairs are elected rather than stitched up in smoke-filled rooms. We should look at more ways in which the public can interact with Parliament; perhaps they can even initiate proceedings in Parliament, whether through suggestions for topical debates or other methods. The Wright proposals are not the entire solution, and they do not go far enough, but they are a step in the right direction. I welcomed Mr. Speaker saying earlier today, in response to a point of order from my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), that he had no reason to believe that these proposals would not be coming to the House and, I hope, voted on in the new year. That will be a very important piece of reform for the House to get through.

I would like to give sincere thanks to the members of my staff—Hannah Wright, Karen Hurst, Jamie McHale and Mark MacDonald—who have been absolutely fantastic this year in helping me to serve my constituents through my Bishopbriggs and Westminster offices.

I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, colleagues and all the staff in the House a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I think that three more hon. Members would like to participate. I therefore hope that they will suspend from their minds the idea that they have 15 minutes each, because we have to get the wind-ups in, starting at approximately half-past 6, if there are to be responses to all the speeches that have been made. I hope that those three Members will try to help each other.

6.6 pm

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson). Let me start by wishing everyone a happy Christmas and a good new year, because I am so infuriated by what I am about to talk about that I will probably forget to do it at the end.

This afternoon I read an article on the BBC website that it is important to mention here. It flagged up a programme that finished about seven minutes ago; it was on the World Service and intended for Africa. It was on a part of the website, newsforums.bbc.co.uk, which does what it says on the tin—it is a forum about the news. It lists the most popular topics that people are talking about at the moment. No. 1 is:

"What impact will the BA strike have?"

That is a topical issue, and I guess one could look at it either way. No. 3 is:

"When does self-defence go too far?"

No. 4 is:

"What are the chances of a deal at Copenhagen?"

No. 5 is: "Are airbrushed adverts misleading?" One could say that each of those issues is interesting, there could be a debate about it, and it could be seen both ways. No. 2 is: "Should homosexuals face execution?" That is not really a question to which one can answer anything other than no. It is one of those 10 million questions to which the answer is no, although I do not wish to make light of it.

The first person who has responded says, very sensibly:

"What kind of question is this?"

A whole bunch of people have responded; the string has now been closed to contributions. Someone who has grasped the issue very clearly says:

"I can't believe I'm actually reading a debate on whether someone…should be executed, for their expressing their sexuality."

Initially I was completely mystified as to why on earth the BBC would have put this string up. I have the privilege of being the chair of the all-party group on the Great Lakes region and genocide prevention. It has a

couple of hundred members from this House and the other House. We are very active on issues to do with Africa, and we are aware that Uganda, sadly, is trying to put through a piece of legislation that would send people to jail for seven years if they are caught committing a homosexual act. Some people think that this will apply only if they have AIDS or HIV, but there is also a criterion whereby if they are a repeat offender they could be executed.

The BBC has chosen to deal with that issue by putting on its website a forum that asks us to consider and debate it, suggesting that one could see it both ways. Of course, it probably imagines that it is communicating mainly with people in Uganda and the rest of Africa. However, every person who has responded comes from somewhere else, such as Winchester, which is not known for being in Africa unless there is a Winchester in Uganda, and Alberta. N. F., a chap from Alberta, or perhaps it is a woman, writes:

"Can I move to Uganda? At least one country in the world is taking moral values seriously... It may sound extreme, but that shock value will allow more people to think about their actions beforehand."

The BBC certainly engendered a bit of discussion on both sides of the argument.

My instinct is that the BBC has tried to tap into the kind of discussion that is going on in Uganda at the moment. We should be looking at it, as most people are, with abhorrence. President Museveni is tacitly encouraging a Back-Bench Bill that has a chance of becoming law and that is homophobic, brutal and savage. We should condemn it, and so should the BBC, just as we do sexual violence in the Congo or genocide in Rwanda or Darfur. Instead, the BBC seems to have thought it appropriate to come up with something that suggests that it is a subject for discussion. I believe that the BBC has done that because it is a subject for discussion in Uganda. But if it can do no more than suggest that there should be even-handed discussion—actually, it can and often does do more—there is something badly wrong.

As it happens, the BBC World Service does much fabulous work in Africa and across the world. It was recently closed down in Rwanda and the BBC spent a great deal of time and effort eventually getting the BBC Kinyarwanda service opened up there. Everyone recognises its great service to people who listen to it in the UK and across the world. However, there is something deeply wrong with the presentation on the website. As I said, it advertises a radio programme, which I have no doubt was mediated, and I am sure that whoever ran, produced and presented it tried to be even-handed in some way. I hope that they gave some sense that a decent, sensible debate about banning homosexuality and sending people to prison for it in Uganda should surely end up with our condemning it out of hand. That clearly has not happened on the website, and I hope that the BBC takes note.

It occurs to me that there is another result of what I consider to be this grave error by the BBC, which I suspect was made by someone fairly junior, because a more senior editor would have seen the problem before it went up on the website. The BBC knows who reads and responds to the website, and almost every person who has responded lives in England. One or two live abroad. It has engendered debate on the subject of whether we should execute homosexuals, and it has done so in Britain with UK taxpayers' money.

I hope that the BBC will pay attention. I have had this opportunity to raise the matter, and perhaps that will have some modest impact. As I was sitting here I e-mailed Mark Thompson, the director-general of the BBC, and I hope that others might be moved to do the same.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that e-mailing from the Chamber is any more in order than the House breaking into "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night", but in the spirit of Christmas we will let it go.

6.12 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): You will doubtless be relieved to hear that I will refrain from both activities, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

A number of hon. Members have paid tribute to the work of the emergency services, which will be working over the Christmas and new year period. So far, everybody who has referred to them has spoken of the fire, police and ambulance services. It pains me slightly that I have to remind the House that there is a fourth emergency service, the coastguard, which will also be on duty as we tuck into our turkey with the trimmings on Christmas day. It provides cover 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

That status as a forgotten emergency service vexes me somewhat, because the recent history of the coastguard service has not been happy. Last year, it came to the point at which members of the coastguard staff went on strike for the first time in their history. I know that that caused many of them real anxiety, because they see themselves as having a vocation and being there to provide a very important service for those of us who live in coastal and island communities and use the sea, either for leisure or our living. They were forced into that position because their pay and conditions had fallen behind those of comparable workers in other emergency services to such an extent that in the past few years the most junior grades have had to have pay settlements imposed on them, because otherwise their pay would have fallen foul of the minimum wage legislation. That is what we are paying the watch assistants, who are responsible for some of the most important, detailed and stressful work available to coastguards.

That is little short of a disgrace, but worse we have subsequently discovered from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's 2008-09 annual report that the same senior management and board members who insisted that the increase for watch officers and watch assistants could not go above the 2 per cent. ceiling set by the Government for public sector pay were in fact awarding themselves increases of, on average, 15 per cent. The chief executive of the MCA saw his wage increase from £127,000 per annum in 2007-08 to £137,000 in 2008-09. That adds insult to injury for very dedicated people who provide a crucial service, and highlights how the MCA has lost sight of its core functions and the sort of leadership that it needs and that is valued in constituencies such as mine. The morale of staff and many watch officers is through the floor, which can be seen from the turnover of staff. If I have a hope for the new year, it is that somebody will take control of the agency and introduce proposals that will allow the staff to be paid a wage that truly reflects the value of their work.

[Mr. Alistair Carmichael]

In my constituency, there is growing concern about the Government's proposals for changes to the furnished holiday lettings rules. I hope the House will bear with me because the matter involves a fairly detailed piece of tax legislation—in all my years as a solicitor, I was never particularly fond of tax law, but it is important. At the moment, people who offer property as a furnished holiday let are entitled to a particular set of advantages under the furnished holiday lettings rules: any losses they incur can be treated as a trading loss and set against other income; capital allowances can be claimed on furniture and furnishings; any capital gain made on the disposal of furnished holiday letting property can be rolled over; and the deemed capital gain on the gift of a furnished holiday letting property can be held over.

The proposal is that furnished holiday lettings should be treated the same as ordinary let accommodation, which is to say that they will be treated as a furnished or unfurnished long let. Those who hold the advantage would make the case that they do more than just provide a furnished property. They would say that they provide laundry services, crockery and the full range of other services on a weekly or fortnightly basis, and that that sets them apart from those who provide normal let accommodation.

The matter is of particular importance to many in my constituency, because many who are engaged in letting the furnished holiday lets I have described are farmers. For as long as I can remember, we have been telling farmers that they need to diversify and find new ways of using their assets. Indeed, over the years, we have seen a massive decrease in the number of farm workers and the need for tied accommodation in farm cottages has also diminished, so for many farmers holiday letting has been an obvious diversification, and they have taken it on with great enthusiasm. They are now having the rug pulled out from under their feet, at a time when margins for farmers are already very tight.

The problem for a constituency such as mine is that if these properties are to be taken off the letting market, all the other tourist-dependent businesses—arts and crafts, food and beverage, and tour buses—that rely on tourists coming to Orkney and Shetland and staying locally will suffer the knock-on effects. I hope that the Treasury will see sense. I cannot believe that the measure will provide a massive tax take for the Government, but it will have a significant impact on some of the most economically fragile communities in the country.

I am mindful of the pressures of time and, although there are other matters about which I would have liked to speak, I shall refrain from doing so in order to allow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) an opportunity to have his say. I wish all hon. Members present the very best for the festive season. Today is a particularly welcome occasion, because it is not often that I can say in December that I look forward to escaping the cold blast of London weather for the much more temperate climate of the northern isles. Other hon. Members have suggested that we should come and see their constituencies as we rush headlong towards the shortest day. It is very difficult to see much in my constituency at this time of year, as we only have about six hours of full daylight, but it is worth seeing in any event. You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or any other hon. Member would be more than welcome.

6.22 pm

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I start by thanking the two previous contributors for reducing the time of their speeches? I was amazed by the extraordinary story that the hon. Member for Falkirk (Mr. Joyce) told about the BBC, and if it had not come from him I would have doubted that it was true. The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) made two powerful points, but I was unaware of his first point, and I hope that that situation is sorted out. One of the wonderful things about sitting in this Chamber is learning the things that matter. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) also spoke powerfully about the need to reform Parliament, and that is an issue that I wish to address tonight.

It would be wrong of me not to thank our armed forces who are serving overseas at the moment, especially those in Afghanistan. I declare a personal interest in that, and for the parents of officers serving abroad this is a particularly difficult time. I pay tribute to all our armed forces.

I also wish to thank Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and the staff of the House for looking after us so well in the last year.

I would like to extend that thanks to the Deputy Leader of the House, who is a genuine and well-respected Member, but unfortunately she is sitting on the Treasury Bench tonight, and I am not a happy bunny. We need to reform this House, we need more democracy and we need to bring power back to Parliament. However, over the last few weeks the Government have been doing the reverse. The Executive have been taking more and more power away from this House and reducing the time for debate.

In particular, I want to talk about private Members' Bills. Earlier today I had the pleasure of sitting here while 18 private Members' Bills received their First Reading. The Bills cover a range of very important issues: the Mortgage Repossessions (Protection of Tenants Etc.) Bill, the Anti-slavery Day Bill, to which I am—I believe—a signatory, the Lisbon Treaty (Referendum) Bill, which I could not get my name on because it was so popular, and the European Union Membership (Referendum) Bill, which I did manage to get my name on.

The problem is that at the moment we do not know if any of those Bills will even get debated. I listened with amazement as Members chose the dates for Second Reading; in fact, one Member chose tomorrow. The problem for Members is that the Government have failed to bring forward the days on which private Members' Bills are to be heard in the House. Standing Orders do not ask that the Executive might perhaps bring forward those days; it is a requirement that the Executive bring forward 13 days in the Session when private Members' Bills have precedence over Government business. That is to protect Back Benchers so that they have a right at least to get a hearing for issues and Bills about which they really care. No such naming of the 13 days has occurred. It is unprecedented in parliamentary history for private Members' Bills to be presented to the House when the dates on which they are to get their Second Reading have not been heard.

You will know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Government have been trying to alter Standing Orders every night for what seems like the past month. Every night hon.

Members have objected to the motion, and it is just possible that the motion will be objected to this evening as well. The ridiculous situation is that the Government are trying to change Standing Orders to reduce the length of time that Members have to discuss private Members' Bills, without having a debate on changing them. Standing Orders are here to protect this Parliament. As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said, the Executive already have too much power, and if they are to take away some of the rights of Back Benchers by amending Standing Orders, the very least that the Government could do is have a debate. I have not heard one reason why we should amend Standing Orders.

I would be delighted if the Deputy Leader of the House could get up at the end of the debate and say, "We'll have those 13 days, and table a motion on the first day back." However, at the moment, we have a ridiculous situation in which Members are having to guess when they can have a Second Reading. Of course, if the days are different Members can put their dates back, but they cannot bring them forward. From the beginning of January 13 Fridays, which would not interfere with recess dates, are available, on which those private Members' Bills could be debated. The Government are just being arrogant and stubborn in not allowing those 13 days.

This is the first time in five years that I have spoken in such an Adjournment debate, and I would like to mention a couple of things about my constituency. In my constituency unemployment is more than double what it was in 1997. In my constituency a secondary school has been demolished and not replaced. The Government are creating 52,000 new homes in north Northamptonshire. The police force in my constituency has one of the worst ratios of police officers to population in the country.

Worst of all, my constituency does not have a hospital. My constituents have to go to Kettering or Northampton general hospital, but the hospitals there are overcrowded and cannot deal with my constituents adequately. In fact, Kettering was, unfortunately, named as one of seven hospitals that have had a higher standard mortality rate than the national average for five years. What we need in Wellingborough is our own hospital, but—can you believe it, Mr. Deputy Speaker?—this Government have closed the hospital out-patient facility in my constituency and moved it. Where do you think they have moved it to? They have moved it to the marginal Labour constituency of Corby. The Government should be ashamed of themselves. We need a hospital in Wellingborough.

6.30 pm

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I take this opportunity to thank all Members who have made contributions today? I give particular thanks to those Members who have said that they are stepping down at the next general election. Despite the time limit on speeches, I felt that all Members were able to get in all the points that, had there not been a time limit, they would probably have taken longer to say, but probably without making any further points.

As usual, we have had local, regional and national issues, as well as touching on some international matters. The hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) started off by telling us of his struggle with the chief executive of the Highways Agency. It is a matter of concern that the Highways Agency held no public meeting before it started work. Indeed, it was even more concerning that the chief executive was not happy to have a meeting with the hon. Gentleman at the site where the work is taking place. I suspect that that fight between the hon. Gentleman and the chief executive of the Highways Agency will continue, and I wish him well in that regard. The hon. Gentleman also raised an interesting point that was subsequently picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning), when she commented on the power that quangos have. Ministers will sometimes keep quangos at arm's length, so that they do not have to get involved in difficult issues.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) raised a number of local issues, among which was the fact that there is concern at the withdrawal of funds for council housing in his area. That is an issue, Mr. Deputy Chairman, on which I suspect many of us in the Chamber can sympathise with the hon. Gentleman, because it is one that we have all felt acutely in our postbags, given the current economic crisis. I speak as a Member representing Cambridgeshire, where there has been a cut in funding for housing.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Meg Munn) made a timely and thoughtful speech, particularly given what is happening in Copenhagen at present. I was particularly interested in her visit to the small Pacific nations, which do not regularly have a powerful voice; in fact, often they simply do not have a voice on the international scene at all, let alone regularly. I am sure that the House will have taken on board what she said about the fact that no Pacific nation will be able to avoid the consequences. Even more startling, however, was the fact that climate change is already beginning to affect some of those nations, particularly Tuvalu, where, as she mentioned, salt water is contaminating fresh water and water is already being rationed. In the light of what she said, we can only hope that the conference in Copenhagen, which is now turning into a summit, will prove fruitful, for the benefit of mankind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, who is a veteran of these recess Adjournment debates, will be sorely missed. Let me put it on record that she has been a powerful advocate for her constituents throughout her time as a Member of Parliament, and her successor will have to do a powerful job in trying to match her. I very much hope that one of the first things that her successor will do is to remember that they must come to all the recess Adjournment debates and give a plug to the local tourist industry, because that is something about which my hon. Friend has been diligent. My hon. Friend also covered a number of other subjects, including the need for reform in this place. As the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, I have taken them on board, as I am sure the Deputy Leader of the House has, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), too, mentioned that he was stepping down, and we were sorry to hear that. He, too, has a proud record of service to his constituents—[Hon. Members: "Distinguished!"] I have been corrected. His record is not only proud but distinguished. Again, his successor will have quite a job to do in following him.

Mr. Deputy Chairman, my hon. Friend made a powerful point—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must get this right: I am the Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Vara: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I apologise most profusely for giving you a promotion—[HON. MEMBERS: "No, no!"] Perhaps I should just carry on, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington made a powerful contribution, in which he pointed out the fact that the world is arranging itself into groups and clusters, and said that that was all the more reason for Britain to be part of the European Union if it is to have a powerful voice on the international scene. I thank him for his contribution.

The hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) gave a typically robust and spirited performance. He certainly spoke well in support of British manufacturing. He had a message for Lord Mandelson about the Royal Mail's refusal to try out the new hybrid trucks. Of course, Lord Mandelson is the de facto Deputy Prime Minister. He does not listen to a lot of people, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman's message will get through to him.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) made a speech based on education, and spoke of the disparity in educational attainment in different parts of the country, as well as describing the specific features in his own constituency. I have to say that I did not agree with all that he said, but I was reminded of the occasion when Mahatma Gandhi said—I shall paraphrase the quote—that if we educate a man, we educate an individual, but if we educate a woman, we educate a whole family.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) made a powerful speech about the adverse effects of 12 years of Labour rule that his constituents have had to put up with. His speech had considerable support on this side of the House—but given the response that many Labour Members will have received on the doorstep recently, I imagine that some of them were minded to agree with him as well, quietly if not publicly. I am pleased that he will be getting his new hospital, and that Network Rail is carrying out a feasibility study for the new railway station. Also, it is only right that the Government should start to think seriously about supporting the National Star college. A society is judged on how it treats its disabled people, and I very much hope that the Government will take that on board.

The hon. Member for Elmet (Colin Burgon) made a detailed speech on the present economic crisis. I disagreed with much of what he said, but I can certainly agree with his point that the banks are not lending money to businesses and individuals. His points about bank charges and about banks abusing their authority were echoed by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson).

The hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) made a typical Lib Dem speech. It was full of political point scoring and light on substance. Perhaps a friend of his will take him to one side and point out that the woes of the country are due to a Labour Government, and have nothing to do with a Conservative Administration.

The right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) always contributes to these Adjournment debates. He rightly spoke about the serious matter of Gary McKinnon, with which I know he has been involved. He also spoke as a determined advocate on the subject of diabetes, and pointed out that prevention is better than cure. I have some sympathy for him, given that his constituency has a large Asian element to it. Asians are renowned for giving considerable quantities of sweetmeats to everyone who visits them, particularly Members of Parliament, and he must find it quite tempting to eat them instead of giving them away to his children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) gave a powerful speech, raising a number of topics. He rightly raised concern about the cost of quangos and public sector salaries. I certainly wish him well in achieving some stability as far as chief constables in Essex are concerned. He also spoke passionately about Tony Blair's comments on the invasion of Iraq—a theme subsequently taken up by other Members. It is fair to say that we all await with considerable interest the outcome of the Chilcot inquiry. My hon. Friend is right to point out that at Christmas-time, people should not give unwanted pets to children—or indeed adults—who may subsequently be unable to take care of them.

The hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) spoke as a former member of the Audit Commission and questioned the balance of a report that described Leicester. I am glad that he was able to put his views on that issue on the record.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) spoke with considerable feeling about the families of service personnel at Christmas. I am sure I speak for the whole House in saying that we certainly agree with his sentiments. He also praised the work of the Royal British Legion, spoke about the impact of defence spending decisions—or indecisions—and criticised the UK Border Agency for its handling of many immigration cases. As the number of immigrant cases being handled is uncertain, I am not surprised that there is so much uncertainty about how the Border Agency deals with those cases.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) gave a moving speech. He spoke of the need to remember those who are no longer with us. He rightly mentioned the bravery of Olaf Schmid and the courage of his widow. We also heard about the work of George Miller. My hon. Friend also mentioned his late father, Sam Lewis, this year being the first anniversary of his death, and we heard how he managed to wave to him when he was in the Strangers Gallery. In my maiden speech I not only managed to refer to my parents but to give them a wave—and got away with it. I was subsequently told that we can get away with most things in our maiden speeches, but thereafter we cannot.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr. Jackson), a constituency neighbour of mine, spoke about the proposed closure of Peterborough Land Registry and the possible loss of 302 jobs. I share his concern and agree wholeheartedly with his campaign to try to save those jobs—a campaign of which I am also part.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) gave a passionate speech on Iraq. A lot of questions were asked, and we certainly hope it will not be too long before answers are provided. He also covered local issues such as funding for the local police and the underfunding of local services.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) spoke at length on educational matters, and was quite keen to praise the Government for their achievement in that area. I am sorry to say that I do not agree with that

praise; in fact, it was noticeable that the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), who spoke after her with no party perspective, did not agree with the Government's education policies either. While the hon. Lady spoke glowingly about the funds given to her local educational establishments, I have to tell her that it is a pity that some of that money could not come to the Great Gidding primary school in my constituency, which was promised £4 million for a new school, which was then stopped just weeks before work was due to commence. There is now no prospect whatever of that new school coming over the horizon.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest is, as I said, having difficulties with the education department concerning an excellent school that he described, and I certainly wish him well in his efforts.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire raised a number of issues, but I shall focus on a couple of the good ones. She rightly spoke about Equitable Life. The Government's handling of the ombudsman's report is shameful; they gain no credit for the way in which they have handled this whole affair. The hon. Lady also spoke about the reform of Parliament and a debate that took place in Westminster Hall only yesterday—a debate noteworthy for the fact that the Government completely failed to say where they stand on the Wright report.

Thanks are due to the last three speakers for the brevity of their comments, and my own comments about them will also be brief. The hon. Member for Falkirk (Mr. Joyce) raised some strong issues concerning the BBC, the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) spoke of the need to review the furnished holiday letting rules, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) was able to record his views on the proposal to reduce the number of days on which private Members' Bills can be debated.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—along with all Members, all Members' staff, and indeed all staff of the House—a very happy Christmas and happy new year, and to send a particular Christmas greeting to all our armed forces serving abroad.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Barbara Keeley): I, too, thank all Members for their contributions. We have heard from 23 Members on subjects ranging from the demise of neo-liberalism to the apparently terrible years in the Cotswolds. We have heard about climate change and decent council homes, about allotments and aircraft carriers, about speech and language therapists, and about inspirational head teachers. The Essex Members have fought over Olly from "The X Factor", and we have heard that we should go to Devon but probably not to the Cotswolds. We have also heard Members' views on Sri Lanka, the Yemen, and the role of Europe in the world. I think that that is about as wide-ranging as we were able to become, but in addition we almost heard the flower duet from "Lakmé"—as well as something about Rod Stewart which I shall gloss over very quickly—and a version of "While Shepherds Watched" sung to the tune of "On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at". We have been very seasonal.

First and most importantly, let me join all the Members who have paid tribute to our armed forces: those serving in Afghanistan, those who have fallen and their families, and those who have been injured. Let me mention in particular Simon Annis from Salford, of 2nd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, who died earlier this year trying to save an injured colleague. Let me also express support for the fire, police and health service staff and the coastguards who will help us to get through the Christmas season.

Let me touch briefly on events that have taken place in the House since the last pre-recess debate. The Chamber was opened to the UK Youth Parliament on 30 October. There were five debates, and I am sure that Members in all parties will agree that the young people conducted themselves very well. I hope that that may become a more regular event in the House.

Members touched on the fact that, following the crisis that engulfed the House in connection with the way in which in which some Members had used their allowances, we had passed the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, which was given Royal Assent on the day of the last pre-recess Adjournment debate. We have now established the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, which has a chief executive, a chair and other board members. It is preparing to make changes which I trust will restore the credibility and standing of the House in the face of what has been a critical period for this place. The need for that was raised by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson).

Very late the other evening, we established the London Regional Committee. Let me take this opportunity to wish its members well in their work. There have been other achievements, but I shall pass over those.

Some Members used their speeches to engage in what the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara), described as political point-scoring—he was right: we heard quite a lot of that today—rather than raising issues that required a response from me. Others raised entirely local issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) mentioned 13, which I think must be a record for him. I am afraid that I lost count of the number raised by the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), but he did his usual sterling job.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) is not in the Chamber now. However, I have already told him how much I sympathise with his difficulties with the Highways Agency. I consider it intolerable that his constituents were not informed of the work before it started, particularly the removal of tree screens. I shall work hard to try to help my hon. Friend. I understand that he has a contact for meetings, that the chief executive of the Highways Agency is now willing to meet him, and that the Secretary of State for Transport will write to him shortly.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) raised a number of issues. He will understand that I cannot comment on the outcome of Ofsted inspections because that is a matter for an independent inspectorate, but I will ensure that the chief inspector writes to him. He also mentioned credit unions. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced the creation of a social investment wholesale bank and further support for credit unions, but I will write to him about the issues in his constituency.

[Barbara Keeley]

I understand that the hon. Gentleman met the Homes and Communities Agency and the relevant Minister last week, to discuss his concerns about funding for decent homes. This is a difficult issue. Other Members have talked about the need for new council housing, and to meet that need there are to be 22,500 new council homes. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his recognition of the Government's work in Sri Lanka. Several other Members talked about that subject. There is still concern in the Chamber about this matter, and I shall get a response to the specific issues raised.

In this week of the climate change conference, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Meg Munn) made an important contribution—as she always does when she speaks in the House. She knows that this is a critical period for securing a deal at Copenhagen, and the Prime Minister is working on achieving that today. She will also know that the Prime Minister proposed a Copenhagen launch fund of $10 billion to assist developing countries—such as those she mentioned—to deal with climate change, with a €2.4 billion contribution from the European Union.

My hon. Friend also referred to the boiler scrappage scheme, which did not get a fair press when it was announced in the pre-Budget report, and national grid tariffs for people in fuel poverty, and I shall pass her comments on to the relevant Ministers. She made a very strong case on that.

On the contribution of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning), I have already said that we should all go to Devon over Christmas, and I am sure that I would if I could. The hon. Lady has had a distinguished 18-year career. Recently, since I have been a Member, she has been vice-chair of the all-party group on carers, of which I was also vice-chair. It does vital work.

The hon. Lady discussed the reform of the House, and I am pleased to hear of her change of heart on the use of Westminster Hall. She also talked about the number of quangos and the importance of supporting disabled people going back to work. She might know that there is an independent review of the work capability assessment, which is due to report in 2010. Clearly, her own meetings at local level will be of help, but she may want to contribute to the review as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley touched on so many issues that I will not be able to discuss all of them. Among them were sheltered housing, British manufacturing and new technologies, support for service families—we have rightly heard about that time and again in this debate—local farming and child care vouchers. He also mentioned the awful attack on Jessica Knight, and I will pass on the compensation issue he raised.

On the electrification of the north-west railway line, my hon. Friend is right to say that both his and my constituents will benefit from that greener and more comfortable and reliable mode of travel. My hon. Friend also mentioned a local shop. I shop at the Unicorn co-operative, which is in Chorlton, not Chorley, but, like Booths, it has good policies on local buying and not selling products brought in by aeroplanes from far distant places.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) talked about a number of global issues, particularly the importance of the role of the EU in the world, and I will make sure his comments are passed on to Foreign Office Ministers. I hope he can make that point about the importance of the EU and our membership of it to his party colleagues as well, however. The hon. Member for Harwich (Mr. Carswell) has today introduced a Bill questioning our membership of the EU and seeking a referendum on that, so the hon. Member for Orpington might want to do some proselytising on his own political side.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) raised a number of issues, in particular about the importance of education as the route out of poverty. I feel that strongly, too. When he was talking, I almost thought I was listening to events in parts of my constituency, such as schools getting more good GCSEs and more pupils going to university. These are all vital achievements. I was interested to hear about the successful mentoring scheme on the Tibbington estate in his constituency, and I hope it continues. I will certainly help to make the relevant Minister aware of it. It is also very good that schools are taking steps such as conducting the survey on local factors that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Finally, my hon. Friend complimented the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. My sister is a speech and language therapist, so I should probably not pass on without complimenting it, too. Speech and language therapists do a vital job, and there is great support in this House for the work they do.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) began his speech rather amusingly by referring to the song, "The twelve days of Christmas", reflecting the musical theme we have had today. However, I am unsure where his series of complaints will take us. In fact, I am very glad that the Labour Government provided time to bring in the Hunting Act 2004; that was time well spent. I would like to pass on my sympathies to those affected by flooding, including those who were recently affected in Cumbria. Some streets in my constituency can flood when there is excess rain, and I know that we must keep thinking of the families and of the devastation that flooding causes. I am pleased that we are legislating to reduce the risks of serious flooding through the Flood and Water Management Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Colin Burgon) talked about the demise of neo-liberalism. What he said was very interesting and we will have to review that by re-reading *Hansard*. He will be glad to know that the Treasury said in the recent statement:

> "We will make first-class standards in public services not a privilege for the few but the right of all, by setting out—in health, education, policing and, in time, social care—new entitlements to high-quality public services, backed where appropriate by the force of law."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 29.]

That ties in very well with what he said.

The hon. Members for Colchester (Bob Russell) and for Castle Point (Bob Spink) both raised the issue of school closures. I have found the schools adjudicator to be a useful stopping point, so it is a shame that the hon. Gentlemen cannot make the case there. However, we note and will pass on what they have said.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the Building Schools for the Future programme—that very large capital investment programme for the next 50 years,

which will provide world-class teaching. Even though there are difficulties in some places, that programme is very worth while.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) talked about Gary McKinnon, and we shall pass on his comments to the Home Secretary. However, I understand that Mr. McKinnon's lawyers have applied for judicial review of the further decision. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East also talked about Yemen, and I can tell him that the UK has contributed an additional £2 million to the UN appeal for emergency aid. I should add that there is a Yemeni community of 600 to 700 people in Eccles, so Yemen is a concern to us in Salford, as it is to him.

The hon. Member for Southend, West who is the most regular attender of these debates, raised a number of points. I shall not deal with the political ones, but on his point about the scrutiny of senior public servant pay, he might wish to note the smarter Government initiative, which was announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and the fact that there will be publication and scrutiny of those very high salaries that he mentioned—most of us think that it is about time. I wish to commend the work of the all-party group on drugs misuse—some of the House's all-party groups do very worthwhile work—and the mention of the importance of seatbelts and animal welfare at this time of year.

The contribution from the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) ranged across a number of topics, including the Royal British Legion—which had already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley—housing, the Navy and the Audit Commission. I was sorry to hear that Portsmouth was not chosen to be a host city for the 2018 World cup—if we get it—but as Plymouth was chosen we do not have to be too concerned.

I was also sorry to hear about the passing of the father of the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). The hon. Gentleman went on to mention Afghanistan, the Royal Navy and the closure of hospital wards, and I shall write to him on those issues.

The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr. Jackson) raised the issue of the closure of the Land Registry office in his constituency, which he redefined as not being in the south-east but in the east midlands. We will take those representations forward for him. I am sure that everyone will be saddened to hear of the case that he mentioned; it is right that those who are exonerated should not be treated unfairly, and I shall write to him about the case.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) raised a lot of issues relating to local councils and bus fare funding, and I shall write to him about those.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) talked about the deeply shocking case in her constituency, which has provoked revulsion across the country. I know that she found it difficult not being able to talk about the case in this place as it was progressing. It is a very good thing that Plymouth city council has been able to support that community and the families. I expect that serious case review to be completed as soon as possible, and I am glad that my hon. Friend recognises the need for that. I shall ensure that I write to her about any other issues that she raised.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) discussed inspirational teachers, and a very good thing that is too. I will have to move over all the other things that were mentioned, as I must come to the end of my contribution, but I shall write to hon. Members about those.

We have much work to do when we return to the House after the Christmas recess. I should like to wish, as other hon. Members have done, a relaxing Christmas and a happy new year to all the staff who provide so much support to us throughout the year, particularly the staff of *Hansard*, the staff in the Library, everyone in the Tea Room, the other catering staff, the cleaners, the Clerks of the Committee, the police, the Serjeant at Arms and her team, and the doorkeepers. We really appreciate the work that they all do to ensure that this place runs as smoothly as possible. A number of Members were successful in obtaining Royal Assent for their private Members' Bill last year, and we hope that many more will be. I also want to wish a merry Christmas and a happy new year to Members on both sides of the House, despite the political point scoring that we had, and finally to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that we have heard sufficient from the hon. Lady to get her drift. Her remarks are appreciated.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall have effect for this Session with the following modifications, namely:

In paragraph (4) the word 'eight' shall be substituted for the word 'thirteen' in line 42 and in paragraph (5) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 44;

(2) Standing Order No. 90 (Second reading committees) shall have effect for this Session with the following modification, namely:

In paragraph (2) the word 'fifth' shall be substituted for the word 'eighth' in line 21; and

(3) Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 29 January; 5 and 26 February; 5 and 12 March; 23 and 30 April; and 7 May.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITIONS

Badman Report (Tiverton and Honiton)

7 pm

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): The House has received many petitions on the Badman report and I would like to present one tonight on behalf of my constituents.

The petition states:

The Petition of persons resident in the Tiverton and Honiton parliamentary constituency,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials;

[Angela Browning]

further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000642]

Equitable Life (Reading East)

7.2 pm

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): I want to present this petition from 20 residents of my constituency on the Government's response to the parliamentary ombudsman's report on Equitable Life.

The petition states that

"the Petitioners either are or they represent...members...of the Equitable Life Assurance Society who have suffered maladministration leading to injustice, as found by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in her report upon Equitable Life"

It further states

"the Petitioners or those whom they represent...have suffered regulatory failure on the part of the public bodies...from the year 1992 onwards, but have not received compensation for the resulting losses"

and

"The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying"

in full

"with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of residents of the constituency of Reading East in the Berkshire region of the U.K. regarding the Government's response to the Parliamentary Ombudsman's reports on Equitable Life.

Declares that the Petitioners either are or they represent or support members, former members or personal representatives of deceased members of the Equitable Life Assurance Society who have suffered maladministration leading to injustice, as found by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in her report upon Equitable Life, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 16 July 2008 and bearing reference number HC 815; and further declares that the Petitioners or those whom they represent or support have suffered regulatory failure on the part of the public bodies responsible from the year 1992 onwards, but have not received compensation for the resulting losses and outrage.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the constitutional standing of the Parliamentary Ombudsman by complying with the findings and recommendations of her Report upon Equitable Life.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000629]

Badman Report (Sutton/Cheam)

7.3 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I am presenting this petition on behalf of Samia Tossio and a group of home educators in my constituency of Sutton and Cheam and in Worcester Park. It is one of a number of petitions to be presented to the House over the past few weeks that address the issue of the Government's plans dramatically to extend the state's power over family life, calling into question the freedom of parents responsibly to choose what is best for their children. The proposal would effectively nationalise home education, requiring all parents who choose to home educate to seek permission every year to do so. I believe that that is a disproportionate, ill-conceived and illiberal measure. I shall not read the text of the petition as other Members have already done so.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of persons resident in the Sutton/Cheam parliamentary constitution,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P000652]

Bristol Refugee Rights

7.3 pm

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): I want to present a petition that is signed by 845 people, mainly residents of my Bristol, West constituency, who have signed a petition gathered by the Bristol refugee rights campaign.

The petition states:

The Petition of supporters of Bristol Refugee Rights and others,

Declares that Britain has an international obligation to provide sanctuary to people fleeing conflict or persecution; declares that three quarters of those seeking safety here are refused protection, but that many cannot go back to their home country; further declares that people in this situation are not allowed to work or claim benefits, and frequently become destitute rather than go back to countries where they would be in real danger; further declares that the Petitioners believe that such people deserve to be treated fairly, humanely and with dignity.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons calls on the Government to grant temporary protection to people who cannot return to their countries of origin; to end the threat and use of destitution as a tool of Government policy against refused asylum seekers; and to allow asylum seekers, including those whose application has been refused, the right to work if they have not been given a decision and/or they cannot leave the UK after six months.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000655]

Badman Report (Portsmouth, South)

7.6 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) (LD): This petition is signed by a number of residents of Portsmouth, South, including Frances Vigay, Ella Mokhtari and many others. It deals with the Government's actions and responses in respect of the Badman report. I personally believe that the report went a lot further than it was meant to, and that it will cause long-term damage to home education.

The petition states:

The Petition of persons resident in Portsmouth South,

Declares that they are concerned about the recommendations of the Badman Report, which suggests closer monitoring of home educators, including a compulsory annual registration scheme and right of access to people's homes for local authority officials; further declares that the Petitioners believe the recommendations are based on a review that was extremely rushed, failed to give due consideration to the evidence, failed to ensure that the data it collected were sufficiently robust, and failed to take proper account of the existing legislative framework.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families either not to bring forward, or to withdraw, proposed legislative measures providing for tighter registration and monitoring of children educated at home in the absence of a thorough independent inquiry into the condition and future of elective home education in England; but instead to take the steps necessary to ensure that the existing Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities are properly implemented, learning from current best practice, in all local authorities in England.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000586]

Birmingham City Council (Financial Reporting)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Mudie.)*

7.7 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate, although I guess that the fact that it is the last debate before Christmas means that it is in something of a graveyard slot. However, it gives me the opportunity to wish you season's greetings, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House about expressing season's greetings and thanks to all members of the House of Commons staff.

I should also like to take this opportunity to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), who will respond to the debate, and my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones), who are also present.

The debate's title shows that it is about transparency in financial reporting and Birmingham city council, which sounds rather technical, but the debate is really about accountability. It is about how far the local authority—which provides or commissions some of the most important services, the ones that my constituents depend on—is really prepared to level with people such as me. I am elected by my constituents, and I want to know how the council spends public money in my area, who decides the priorities for spending the money that is controlled by the council in the short and medium terms, and what those priorities should be.

Those are issues that I am only now bringing before the House by means of this specific debate, but I have been raising them with the city council not for weeks or months but for years. I know that the fact that I have raised those issues, and that I continue to do so, is a source of irritation to key figures in the city council—both in the central cabinet that the Conservatives control city-wide, and among some of the 12 Conservative councillors that represent wards in my Birmingham, Northfield constituency.

I sometimes get the feeling that they are wondering, "What's the Labour MP doing poking his nose into these issues? Why is he wasting our time asking all these questions? We are the council. We have quite enough to do getting on with what we have to do as a council without him constantly going on at us. Why doesn't he just stick to his own job?"

Actually, I think that that is my job. Part of the reason is that, according to its own rhetoric, the council does not just want scrutiny of what it is doing. The council also says that it wants the public—the people whom councillors and I are elected to serve—to be able to comment on services in their communities, and to influence their shape.

The council has a series of committees at constituency level, theoretically all with devolved budgets. As a city with 1 million people—the largest local authority in England—Birmingham is simply too big to try to do everything from the centre. Theoretically, all parties

[Richard Burden]

sign up to that principle—an acceptance that greater efficiency and effectiveness are achieved by getting decisions made closer to the ground. But devolution is about more than setting up different city council structures to negotiate internally with each other, whether that is between different parts of the city council's operation at constituency level or at the centre, or one department negotiating with another.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that those devolved constituency meetings are invariably scheduled for days when Parliament is sitting, to prevent Members of Parliament from being there?

Richard Burden: It is funny that my hon. Friend says that. When the constituency committees were introduced in Northfield, they always met on a Saturday, which is not ideal in many ways, but it meant that I as a Member of Parliament was able to get to most of them. Interestingly, once the Conservatives gained a majority on that committee, they moved the meetings to weekdays. I can get to very few of them now. I occasionally attend meetings when they are held in the recess. Probably, after this debate, we will find that none is held during the parliamentary recesses. My hon. Friend makes a good point.

According to what I believe, and according to the council's own rhetoric, devolution is also about consultation and engagement with the people whom public institutions such as Birmingham city council serve in making the decisions that they make. If we are really brave, devolution may even be about taking those first steps along the road of empowering local people to make a difference to the shape of services in their areas and their neighbourhoods.

Everyone seems to sign up to the rhetoric of consultation and engagement, and often even empowerment. We see it scattered around goodness knows how many city council publications. Councils nominate themselves for goodness knows how many awards, praising their own achievements and creativity in these areas. Sometimes they even win those awards because their self-promotion often seems to make a compelling case.

Of course there are examples of good practice in Birmingham, but when I try to relate all the rhetoric to what I see happening on the ground in my constituency, there is a huge gap. Put bluntly, if it is difficult for a Member of Parliament to get a clear picture of what the city council is doing when, generally, MPs can get hold of financial reports, write letters to this committee or that cabinet member, or even hold a debate here in Parliament, what chance is there for an individual constituent in Birmingham, Northfield? What chance is there for the voluntary or community group that relies on funding controlled or commissioned by the city council under programmes such as the supporting people programme—for groups that are scared that if they rock the boat or question the city council too much, they will be out on their ear?

Let me give a few examples to show how difficult it is to find out what is going on in Birmingham. A couple of months ago, looking at a financial statement relating to the service plan for my constituency of Northfield for the coming year, I found a budget heading called "Community Arts". It is true that, at local level, there was a small community arts budget last year. It was for about £3,000. However, when I looked at the service plan for the coming year, £301,000 was listed as being cut from a budget that was only £3,000 in the first place. So I asked what it was all about. I did not understand. "Don't worry," I was told. "It doesn't mean that. You see, most constituencies don't have a community arts budget at all, so we have been told by the centre"—the centre of the council—"that this is where we should park the efficiency savings that we have to make."

I was not too happy about that. When I raised the matter again at the meeting of the city council's constituency committee for Northfield, which I was able to attend, on 22 September this year, I got a similar explanation. The minutes of that meeting record my response fairly accurately. They state:

"The Member of Parliament considered that this method of accounting made the figures completely meaningless and he requested that it be placed on record that he considered this arrangement to be unsatisfactory."

As I say, those minutes capture my sentiments exactly. However, I did not get anywhere nearer knowing what was going on—either at that meeting or when the minutes came out.

Another example of what I am talking about is a project called business transformation, which the city council says is about developing a fundamentally different approach to running its services, so that it will be more efficient and save millions of pounds. We are told that the programme is about getting resources to the front line and saving on central bureaucracy. It may even be one of those projects where the council has nominated itself for awards, and it may even have won one or two of them. Indeed, it may be an excellent programme, but I simply do not see the evidence on the ground—in my constituency.

I do know—from figures that I managed to extract from the city council after a lot of pushing, prodding and trying—that financing the cost of the business transformation programme means a cut to Northfield's budget in net terms of £55,000 in 2007-08, £89,000 in 2008-09 and an anticipated £241,000 in 2009-10. I have also been told by the council that the business transformation project will not hit front-line services, and that no savings will be made that are not, as the council put it, "encashable". But when I have asked who is doing the encashing, and how much saved money will go back to serve the people of Northfield and, in particular, go back to the budgets over which, at least theoretically, there is some local control, the responses have been esoteric to say the least.

The entire devolved budget for the Northfield parliamentary constituency is about £9.37 million, so a cut of £241,000, on top of other efficiency savings, is potentially pretty serious. Surely, therefore, it is not too much to ask for some straight answers to the question, "Exactly where has that money gone?" There is no evidence that only Northfield is experiencing such problems; my impression is that similar problems exist in every one of Birmingham's parliamentary constituencies.

Rumours abound about big changes to the way in which leisure centres in Birmingham are run and managed, but most of us will not know much about what is going on until contracts have been signed and things are

presented as a fait accompli. In that context, I shall ask my hon. Friend the Minister some questions. She will be aware of the concern—it has attracted considerable press comment—about the millions of pounds of working neighbourhoods fund money that the Government provide to Birmingham. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government recently wrote to Birmingham city council's deputy leader, who chairs the Birmingham strategic partnership, to express his disappointment at the slow progress in using those funds.

Although I know of projects up and running in my constituency which simply would not exist if the Government had not invested that money, I too am concerned about the pace of spend. All too often, trying to get a handle on what is going on is about as easy as trying to knit fog. It is not easy to sort out why things are so painfully slow, and it is not easy to see whether, overall, working neighbourhoods fund money is being spent on what it should be spent on.

For the avoidance of doubt, I must state that I want the investment to continue. Indeed, I welcome the extra support that Birmingham has received from the Secretary of State in recent weeks, but that does not absolve the city council or, to some extent, its partner organisations from being far more transparent in what they do. I do not think that the city council is deliberately obtuse about these matters—either with me, with its partners in the Birmingham strategic partnership or with the people of Birmingham. Rather, the council is such a large bureaucracy, and so obsessed with its own rules and procedures, that it ends up understanding accountability only between different bits of itself, rather than to anyone else. That is a problem, and I say again that if a Member of Parliament often cannot find out what is going on, what real chance do the public stand? If local people cannot even find out what is happening, how will they have the chance to exercise any real influence over local decisions that affect them and their area?

I am not saying that opaque decision making comes out of only Conservative-controlled institutions such as Birmingham city council. These days the Conservatives spend much of their time talking about a "new localism" or a "radical decentralisation" of power, but we need to remember that there is still a huge gap between their rhetoric of decentralisation and the reality on the ground in Tory-led authorities such as Birmingham. The Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), talks about giving real power to local people, but his own Conservative colleagues on Birmingham city council cannot seem to manage to deliver that in practice. What does that say about how a Conservative Government would behave given that the Conservative party chairman, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles), has said:

"Our Conservative Councils will demonstrate how we will run the country"?

I guess that how the Conservatives deal with the gap between rhetoric and reality is up to them. People will have the chance to make a judgment about that in due course.

For now, I would like to ask for help from the Minister. I recognise that she cannot run Birmingham city council. However, I hope that the inquiries that the Secretary of State has made about the working neighbourhoods fund will bear fruit and that the results will be widely shared. I ask the Minister to ensure that in the DCLG's dealings with Birmingham city council, she reminds it that it has a responsibility to be far more open than it is being, including with the city's MPs. I also ask her to ensure that next time Birmingham city council nominates itself for a best practice award or for praise on an issue where there is DCLG involvement of some sort, she will look beyond the rhetoric and self-promotion to see if what it is saying in theory is reflected in what is happening on the ground.

7.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Barbara Follett): My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) is to be congratulated on securing the last debate of the year and on using his time to raise an issue that concerns him, his constituents, many hon. Members and the Government.

My hon. Friend stressed the importance of transparency and accountability in the finances of Birmingham city council. I absolutely agree. It is incumbent on all of us, in any type of public service, be it in Birmingham or anywhere else, to ensure that we provide the information that citizens need and deserve. This is a priority for the Government and for me. After all, that information is the property of the citizens who employ us to deliver it. As our recent White Paper, "Putting the Front Line First: smarter government", makes clear, we want to give people the tools they need to help to shape the services they depend on.

We also want to give people the tools they need to hold Government to account at all levels, as my hon. Friend has done today. Technology has a key role to play in building this new relationship. It is liberating and illuminating. It opens two-way channels of communication between citizens and professionals and helps to provide the increased transparency that he is seeking. The Government will help with this transparency by publishing unprecedented amounts of information and data about the institutions, expenditure and people that serve the public. However, the mere publication of data is not enough—we have to contextualise them and ensure that they are understandable and allow for comparisons, particularly across front-line services. We want to stress outcomes, delivery and value for money in that data, which will be available in reusable form by 2011. We will work with local government to develop comparable measures of value for money across a range of local government services. We will consult on those measures from spring 2010 and publish them in 2011.

My hon. Friend made particular reference to Birmingham's working neighbourhoods fund. I can assure him that we are working extremely closely with the city council and the local strategic partnership, Be Birmingham, to ensure that we move on from the slow start and slow delivery that led to the underspend in the £118 million or so of grant. We want to ensure that spending gets back on track. Birmingham city council has said itself that the underspend is not good enough, and when 37 per cent. of the working age population are workless, it certainly is not good enough. However, it is not right to penalise the people of Birmingham by holding back funding that their deprived areas desperately need.

Ms Gisela Stuart: Will the Minister advise us on what we can do? It is not just a question of the money not being spent. If Members of Parliament cannot even find out how the decisions were arrived at and who made them, it becomes extremely difficult to hold to account people in a position of power.

Barbara Follett: I agree, and having experienced something similar myself in the years in which I have worked in the eastern region, I assure my hon. Friend that the Government's White Paper is aimed at addressing that problem. So is our work on Total Place, in which we are mapping public sector spending in different areas. The spend in Birmingham is a mind-boggling £7.5 billion per annum, and we need to keep track of it. The Government are well apprised of the need to do that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield reminded us, in our dealings with councils including Birmingham we must urge them to be more open and ensure that they truly deserve best practice awards.

The review by Be Birmingham of the working neighbourhoods fund underspend identified problems in the appraisal process, programme and project management, recruitment procedures, and the tailoring of neighbourhood and constituency employment and skills plans to local needs. Some of what happened can be attributed to careful preparation—none of us wants huge amounts of money to be spent badly. However, as my hon. Friend mentioned, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has written to Birmingham city council and to Birmingham's MPs, saying:

> "We have of course been disappointed with the slow delivery of existing spending plans, and have recently highlighted our concerns about this in public."

He added:

> "However, I am determined that the people of Birmingham should not be penalised for slow action by their local authority, and should still receive the allocation on the same basis as all the targeted authorities."

I understand the concern of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I recently visited Birmingham and saw in action one of the projects that the money is funding. It is called Enta, which has worked in the city for many years to help get people back into employment and enjoying working life, particularly those who have been unemployed for many years.

Thanks to section 6 of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007, which requires the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to make arrangements for the production of local spending reports, local spending reports provide information on expenditure by bodies exercising public functions in a particular area over a specific period. The first local spending report was published this April and covered a substantial proportion of local public expenditure. It represented an important but, I stress, initial step.

The Government are continuing to strengthen the information provided and to ensure that it is accessible and easy to use. However, as I said, given such a mass of information, it is important to produce not only volume, but quality, and that the reports are practical, useful and cost effective.

Future local spending reports will be published online in a clear and user-friendly format that will enable easy interrogation of the data. They will include a wide range of public data on local spending by public bodies, including local authorities, and information will be made available on the local data exchange. An analytical capability will be available on the places databases. Greater transparency will make it easier to look across all local services in a specific area and to spot evidence of duplication or waste. It will help authorities and citizens to do a health check on the public spending in their areas.

It is of course already a legal requirement that local authorities produce a statement of accounts for each financial year which sets out their income and expenditure and gives a year-end balance sheet. The timely publication of high-quality year-end accounts is fundamentally important to sound financial management in every walk of life, not just local authorities. However, in local authorities, the statements must be presented fairly and give a true view, from 2009-10, of the authority's financial position. That means that the accounts must comply with the highest standards of accounting practice applicable to company accounts in the private sector.

Local authority accounts achieve that, but they also incorporate some modifications that are required by statute, largely to recognise the distinct nature of public sector bodies that are financed by taxation. The need to meet private sector standards and the statutory requirements makes local authority accounts rather complicated to say the least, but some authorities provide very useful summary accounts that give a clear presentation of their finances.

Birmingham city council failed to meet the timetable set down for the publication of those accounts this year. Accounts must be approved by council members by 30 June and published by 30 September. As I said, Birmingham city council failed to meet the timetable last year, and its audited accounts for 2008-09 had still not been published by 30 November 2009. We understand that the Audit Commission is to report on its concerns about the late publication of audited accounts very shortly.

Finally, I should like to touch briefly on the local government finance settlement, which of course makes the delivery of local authority services possible. The year 2010-11 will be the final year of the first ever three-year settlement for local government in England. Allocations of formula grant and area-based grant have been published for all authorities for all of those three years. We have also published allocations for all authorities of 100 per cent. by value of all specific grants that can be announced in advance. In other words, we have been as transparent as we can about the supply side, and we have given local authorities more certainty about available resources than has previously been available.

Over the current three-year settlement, we have also provided an additional £8.6 billion to local government—an average 4 per cent. increase per year in funding. However, we do expect local authorities such as Birmingham to ensure that the citizens to whom they are accountable know exactly, and in a timely fashion, how that money has been spent. That is their responsibility, and it is our responsibility to ensure that they fulfil it well and properly.

I thank my hon. Friend for this timely reminder of the work that we still have to do to ensure that we are as transparent and accountable as we can be. I also thank him for giving me the opportunity on the occasion of my final Christmas in this House to wish all the hon. Members a happy Christmas and a peaceful new year. I also wish to add my thanks to the those of the Deputy Leader of the House to all the people who work in this House to make things easier for the rest of us. Happy Christmas!

Question put and agreed to.

7.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 December 2009

[CHRISTOPHER FRASER *in the Chair*]

Afghanistan Strategy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr. Heppell.)*

9.30 am

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): A hundred British dead—why? That is the question this morning. A hundred British dead this year, three Dutch dead, seven Italians, 10 French and seven Germans; why the disparity? The flame at the Arc de Triomphe was rekindled last week to commemorate all Europeans who died this year in warfare. At that point, the total was 181 and the number of British dead was 99.

There was another significant anniversary last week, which was forecast by a Back Bencher in March 2006. The Government, with all their great knowledge and all of the experts on their side, said that we were going into Helmand province in the hope that not a shot would be fired and that we would be out in three years. That strategy was as accurate and reliable as the current strategy. At that time, there had been only seven British deaths, five of which were in accidents and only two of which were military deaths. We have gone from that to the dreadful position we are in now, with 237 deaths. At that time, a Back Bencher said that going into Helmand was the same as the charge of the Light Brigade—an act of incompetence and futility. Last Monday, the total British dead passed twice the number killed in the charge of the Light Brigade. Why have they died? Why are we there? Why are we continuing to send soldiers there?

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the tragic 100th death. That was the death of a soldier from the Royal Anglian Regiment—my local regiment—by small arms fire. Will he join me in sending condolences to the family?

Paul Flynn: I will certainly talk at length about condolences and the soldiers. The 200th soldier who died was Kyle Adams, who was engaged to and planning his future life with a constituent of mine. She wrote a touching letter about her hopes of marriage, the children they had hoped for and the place in which they had planned to live. She wrote that she met her "cold dead hero" when he returned to this country.

This morning, we were told a new fiction. We have reached the milestone of 100 deaths and carefully manicured soundbites have been prepared for the occasion. We are told that we must think not too much about casualties, but about other things: the propaganda, the lies and the posturing that we have been subjected to for the last eight years. We must not think about the casualties. Perhaps we should not think about those who are maimed, either. At least 300 have been maimed. People have lost arms, legs, genitals, their sight, their hearing. There is nothing we can do about that. We are told that we should concentrate not on that this morning, but on the manicured fiction that the Government—and the Opposition, I am afraid—are putting out.

Why are our soldiers dying? Are they dying to protect Karzai, the corrupt thief who says that he will suddenly become non-corrupt? If so, will he arrest his brother Wali, who is the best known, most powerful and richest of the drug dealers in the land? I think that is unlikely. Are they dying to demonstrate our solidarity with a man who rigged his election so efficiently? Of the $25 billion of international aid that he has taken, only $5 billion at the most has got through, and the rest has been spread out among his cronies and party members to buy his continuation in office. There have been no improvements in Afghan life as a result of the bulk of that aid. Afghanistan still has the second worst infant mortality rate in the world and the third worst rate of mothers dying in childbirth.

Are our soldiers dying to protect Karzai's cronies, such as Mohammad Fahim and Abdul Dostum? Fahim, who is now Karzai's chosen vice-president, was responsible for an orgy of murder, rape and looting in a poor section of Kabul, in which he and his army slaughtered 800 members of the minority Hazara community. He has a powerful position in the future of the new Afghanistan. Dostum, the other nominee for vice-president, was released from exile by Karzai to bolster the Uzbek vote. The most famous thing in Dostum's career is that he promised 2,000 Taliban prisoners safe passage if they surrendered their arms, then sealed them in metal cargo containers and suffocated them. Karzai, Dostum and Fahim are our allies. They are running the regime that we are sending our soldiers to protect. They should be in The Hague as war criminals, but instead they are our chosen allies.

Another reason for being there is the repeated fiction of the protection from terrorism. The Germans, French and Italians do not have the brass neck to lie to their people by suggesting that keeping their soldiers fighting in the war in Afghanistan is anything to do with terrorism, but we do. There has never been a terrorist plot or threat from Afghanistan or the Taliban.

If we were to ask the Taliban why they are killing our soldiers, what would they say? I have asked various Ministers and military people whether they have asked the Taliban about that and they have not. Would the Taliban say, "When we have killed all your soldiers, we will come over to London and Newport to blow up your streets."? Or would they say, "We are killing your soldiers because they are the ferengi. They are in our country. It is our sacred, religious duty to expel foreigners like yourselves from our country, just as our fathers did with the Russians and as our grandfathers and great grandfathers did with every foreign invasion into Afghanistan."?

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I am sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's comments. Does he agree that there are approximate parallels with the misleading way in which we attempted to deal with terrorists in the north of Ireland for a long time? Originally, we wrote them off as people who were insane and impossible to do business with, but they now seem to be running Northern Ireland rather well. Does he agree that if we are serious about a terrorist threat in Afghanistan, we should seek co-existence and negotiated solutions, rather than deluding ourselves and others that we can solve it through military solutions?

Paul Flynn: I agree entirely. We all know that there will be a deal eventually, perhaps in two or three years. We have a strategy that is gratifying and right for politicians. It is right for both main parties in this House because it takes us beyond the hurdle of the general election. It is right for the American President because it gives him some room. He has a Janus-faced philosophy. He must appear belligerent. As the first black President, with the middle name Hussein, he cannot possibly be seen to give in to a Muslim enemy because that would destroy him in redneck public opinion. He has no choice but to follow what has been urged on him. He is too intelligent to think that it will work; of course it will fail. There will be a deal and he has given a date for it, which is the perfect date for the next American presidential election. So, are our young people dying because of the presidential timetable in America and our own needs as politicians to survive? We are waiting for the day when we can exit, but we spin the situation as if it is a victory and present it as such. That is exactly the case that was put forward at the end of the first world war, which I will come to in a moment.

Perhaps we are fighting and dying in order for the day to arrive when we will hand over the country to the Afghan police and army. The Afghan police are depraved, brutal, lawless, drug-addicted thieves, who persecute and abuse the people they are supposed to serve. They are corrupt from top to bottom and are organised on the basis of bribes and theft.

In Penkala, a village that we liberated as part of Panther's Claw, the elders said, "We've had the Taliban here, and now we're frightened that the Afghan police are going to move in, because the last time they were here they practised bacha bazi." They corralled the pre-pubescent boys in the town and used them for sexual purposes—for rape. That was the practice of the Afghan police, and the elders have said that if they come back again, they will join the Taliban. The person who was interviewing the elders said, "But the Taliban are cruel people," to which the elders said, "Yes, they are cruel people, but they are men of principle and they do not practice bacha bazi."

Yet, the Afghan police are the people on whom we are depending. The fantasy that we can substantially increase their numbers and have a clean Afghan police is completely unattainable. An example of a corrupt police force being replaced by one that is non-corrupt can be found in Georgia, where they sacked the entire police force and started again. However, we are not doing that; we are building on the rotten foundation of the Afghan police. That is not going to work.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has been consistent with his views in many debates, and he is showing that again here. However, I am trying to understand where he is taking us with his comments, because he is actually making the very argument that has been made by Conservative and Labour Members.

The whole Afghan nation has been corrupt from the time of Dost Mohammad, when we first wandered over there, to King Amanullah's time, to today. If President Karzai were removed and somebody else replaced him, the country would still be as corrupt as it is today. The fact that the police are corrupt and there is corruption shows what extra efforts need to be made to help the country. If we do not help the country, it will become the bastion of terrorism and we will end up with the problems that we saw in relation to 9/11 and 7/7. The hon. Gentleman's idea that we can somehow withdraw troops and expect a non-corrupt civilisation to appear is simply wrong.

Paul Flynn: The hon. Gentleman is clearly a believer of fairy tales. He believes that there is going to be a happy ending to this, but no one will live happily ever after in Afghanistan. There was a civil war going on when we went in. The Taliban had control of 80 per cent. of the country, and the northern warlords had control of the rest. Of course, Afghanistan was corrupt. It was corrupt 100 years ago; it was corrupt 200 years ago. Corruption is the lubricant that drives Afghan life. We are not going to change that. We are not omnipotent, but we think that we are.

Let us consider our position. We talk as if we have got rid of elements of al-Qaeda in the country. The latest forecast from the independent body that produces maps on such matters shows that, last year, the Taliban had control of 72 per cent. of the country. However, the calculation this year is that they have control of 80 per cent. We will soon have 10,000 troops there, only 2,000 of whom are fighting troops who are on the front line. What percentage of the country does the hon. Gentleman think we control? We could possibly say 1 per cent., yet we are behaving as if we are masters of the universe and will change the habits of thousands of years. That is impossible. The new policy that has been introduced has been sold to us as something that will work, but it needs at least 12 miracles for the Obama policy to work.

Mr. Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman's argument that the Taliban are somehow in control of 80 per cent. of the country is simply wrong. They may have access to 80 per cent.—or a high percentage—of the countryside, but much of that is desert. For example, 70 per cent. of Helmand province is on the Helmand river, which is where our troops are actually based. If he wants to get rid of the police now, where are the other batch of potential policemen in Afghanistan, who are not corrupt and will take these jobs?

Paul Flynn: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes some reasonable points about the state of Afghanistan, but let us consider the alleged progress and the current position. There was talk of progress this morning and I am sure that there will be more. We made a great fuss last August about the fact that a turbine was conveyed to the Kajaki dam, which had been bombed by the Americans in the previous war. That was regarded as a huge triumph. It took 4,000 soldiers to get that turbine there—I have been told that there were 3,000 NATO and 1,000 Afghan soldiers involved in that one operation. How much electricity has it produced? It has not yet produced enough electricity to light a bicycle lamp. In fact, there is one less turbine there, because another turbine has broken down.

Let us consider the situation of the Americans. They are paying $1,500 per lorry in protection money to the groups that regard themselves as security firms to get all their goods from Kabul to Kandahar. Most of that money goes back into the pocket of the Taliban. That is

the reality of life in Afghanistan. There is a President who cannot travel 30 miles outside his own capital. That is the reality. The Taliban are very much in control of movements there.

Let me just give one more example that has had very little publicity. Back in August, there was a huge fuss about the number of helicopters in Afghanistan. In 10 days, we—the British Army—destroyed two of our Chinook helicopters, which cost £40 million each. They were not wrecked beyond repair—one of them had had a heavy landing and the other had some bullet holes from hand guns—and both could have been repaired at little cost. We did not repair them or wait 24 or 36 hours to get a heavy lifting helicopter to take them out to a place of safety. We blew them up because the security was so bad we could not guard them for the 24 hours it was necessary to do so. That is the truth, but we do not see blazing headlines about that in our newspapers. The mythology is continuing that there is the possibility of victory. The words "possibility of success" were used this morning. I do not believe that there will be success and I want our soldiers to be brought home.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): Speaking from my personal experience as a development officer in Afghanistan, I wish to ask whether the hon. Gentleman will at least accept that he is focusing very much on just one region? I have seen projects going on with my own eyes—for example, irrigation schemes that I worked on in Herat, and a new airport and infrastructure that has allowed farmers to get their goods to market has been put in place in Faisalabad. Across much of the country, genuine development progress is being made, which is helping the lives of local Afghans.

Paul Flynn: Yes, of course I accept that, but that is not the problem. The problem is Helmand province. We are in only one of the country's 34 provinces. The reason we have the problem in Helmand is entirely of our own making because we charged into what was a peaceful province and the result was predictable. When the first soldier was killed in Helmand province in June 2006, an early-day motion was tabled in this place, which said that this excursion will strengthen the Taliban and possibly lead to a British Vietnam. That was the view of Back Benchers at the time. Of course, it is very difficult to spend what the Americans are spending—£1 billion a day—without doing some good. We are very much aware that some development work is going on. However, that is not the problem. The problem is why are we sending our soldiers to die there? That is what we should be addressing now.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is not only the Afghan people, but the British people who have been denied a point of view. At the time of a fundamental change in mission—when we went into Helmand—this Parliament should have had a vote. We were allowed a vote on the Iraq situation, but we were not allowed a vote on Afghanistan. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Paul Flynn: I agree entirely. It is absolutely right that we should have a vote on that at some time.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Flynn: I will give way in a moment, but I want to make some progress first.

The other group on which we are building our hopes is the Afghan army. The idea is that the army will be expanded in huge numbers, which is a difficult thing to do. So, who is in the Afghan army? According to David Loyn, the BBC correspondent, 60 per cent. of them are heroin addicts and virtually all of them use cannabis.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Is not the greatest failure that we did not go in and wipe out the poppy fields?

Paul Flynn: That was mission impossible from the start. Going into Afghanistan with the aim of wiping out the poppy fields would have been as successful as the 20-year campaign against Colombia. Had we wiped out the poppy fields at the start, there would still be no shortage of heroin, because markets move and the poppy growing would have gone to Myanmar, north Pakistan, Kazakhstan and elsewhere, and we would have seen the Colombia-isation of that area. Wiping out the poppy fields would have done no good at all, because the problem is with the demand side. We are sucking in the supplies of poppy, so it would not have worked.

Patrick Mercer: The hon. Gentleman's argument about going into Helmand province is well made, and from one point of view we all agree that the force that was sent was grossly undermanned. However, could not the same argument be made about Normandy, which was jolly nice and quiet before we invaded? Why on earth did we have to go and stir up that hornet's nest on 6 June 1944? It was because if we had not invaded, we would not have taken on Nazism.

Paul Flynn: I listen with some astonishment to the voice of the military on that matter. We went into Normandy because Europe was dominated by an evil empire run by a wicked man who had conquered other countries. There was a war, but the hon. Gentleman's comparison is ludicrous. We went into a peaceful area in Afghanistan, and the Taliban are fighting and killing us because we are in their country. When we went into Normandy we went into the country of an ally and the French wanted us there. The people in Helmand did not want us there.

Lembit Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that trying to draw comparisons with world war two completely misses the point? I believe that his point is that there is endemic support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, partly as a direct result of our actions there. That was the same problem we had in certain parts of Northern Ireland, and it has been exacerbated and made much more extreme in Afghanistan.

Paul Flynn: It is certainly true that our presence in both Iraq, where a million Iraqis died, and in Afghanistan, where 100,000 Afghans have died, has increased the threat of terrorism on our own soil. Our terrorist threats have come from Yorkshire and Pakistan, not from the Taliban and not from Afghanistan at all. That threat is an utter myth and a scare story that has been put out. The latest scare story, which is similar to what happened

[Paul Flynn]

when they ran out of excuses for going to war in Iraq, is the nuclear threat, yet the Americans say they are quite comfortable with the situation in Pakistan.

The Afghan army is another one of those platforms on which we build our hopes for success in the future. Virtually all the Ministers who have had responsibility for Helmand have gone to spend more time with their financial interests and are not here to answer on the matter, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), who answered many of the debates here as a Minister, has now gone to the Back Benches, where he speaks the truth intelligently. He said in an intervention in a debate on Afghanistan a few days ago that one group of the Afghan army changed sides three times in one 24-hour battle, depending on who was paying the bribes. That is the Afghan army that we plan to build up and leave so that the country is secure and everyone will live happily ever after.

One of the old Afghan generals from Soviet times, Jabbar Karaman, described a section of the Afghan army several weeks ago, saying that seven Taliban attacked a convoy in Helmand that was being guarded by 300 Afghan soldiers, and the soldiers fled. That is the reality of the Afghan army. Jabbar Karaman said:

"The Afghan soldiers do not believe in the government, they do not believe in the system and they don't believe in the international community."

Why should they? If they do not believe in the project, why on earth should we send our soldiers to die there? The idea that we are sending our people there for success or stability, based on the new strategy, is an utter fiction. It is impossible to have a victory using the Afghan army and police and the corrupt bunch of people now running the country.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I am following my hon. Friend's argument with interest. Is it a myth that al-Qaeda, aided and abetted by the Taliban, was plotting terrorist attacks against this country on an ongoing basis from Afghanistan, and is it a myth that al-Qaeda was responsible for the dreadful attack on the twin towers in America? Are all of those contrived myths? Is al-Qaeda and the threat to British national security a myth or an invention of the British Government? I ask the hon. Gentleman to respond directly to that point.

Paul Flynn: The contrivance is that the Government conflate al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and they must understand—I hope the Minister is listening—that they are not the same thing. Al-Qaeda were guests in Afghanistan, and the Afghans do not want to get them out because they have a pronounced sense of hospitality. They would probably treat us as guests as well if we had not gone there with bombs and bullets.

There is a great difference between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The Taliban has no interest in terrorism, yet we are fighting the Taliban. If we want to have a debate on Pakistan, let us have a debate on it, but the Government also contrive to conflate Afghanistan and Pakistan. They have invented a new country which they refer to as the region, as everything is put down to the Afghan-Pakistan border. In fact, they are two separate countries. The threat of terrorism comes from Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, but not from the Taliban, who have an entirely different agenda.

James Fergusson, in his book, tells a story about a time he talked to a Taliban leader, which is more than any of our politicians have done. That Taliban leader said that he did not want to learn to love his children, who were aged eight, six and three, and that he had made them live in another village. He said that if they loved him and he loved them it would be worse when he was killed. James Fergusson asked, "You do not want to be killed, do you?" The Taliban leader replied, "Of course I want to be killed. It is my dearest wish, as my father was killed fighting the Russians, as my great-grandfather was killed and as my great-great-grandfather was killed. It is my sacred, religious duty, because these ferengi"— foreigners—"are in my country and I have to expel them."

Can we not get this simple message across: our soldiers are being killed because they are present? The answer is not to send more soldiers to act as more targets for Taliban bombs, but to bring our soldiers out of Afghanistan. That is the only solution we have and we will do it eventually. In the meantime, we are dilly-dallying for reasons of political expediency here and in the United States. That is the heart of the position we are in. Five hundred additional soldiers are going to Afghanistan, and we were told on the radio this morning that we should expect more deaths and put up with that, but we should not put up with it.

The war in Afghanistan is probably an illegal war. International law states that a country may go to war when there is a threat against it from the local population of a country. There is no threat to Britain from Afghans and there was no threat to Britain from Iraqis, but we went to war in both countries. I believe that history will judge both to have been illegal wars. On the terrorism threat, we have seen the terrible event that took place in this country, but I believe that that had no connection whatever with the Taliban.

I was interested this morning to read a poem that has been published by our new poet laureate. At last we have a poet laureate who does not write poems about royal anniversaries, church bells ringing and Christmas bells at Christmas time. She writes about reality—the dirty, evil, horrible reality of life in Britain now. One verse states:

"In Afghanistan,
no partridge, pear tree;
but my true love sent to me
a card from home.
I sat alone,
crouched in yellow dust,
and traced the grins of my kids
with my thumb.
Somewhere down the line,
for another father, husband,
brother, son, a bullet
with his name on."

In this House, in 1917, there was a parallel to the position that we are in now. The first world war was still going on, men on both sides were dying like cattle in huge numbers and a point of near stalemate had been reached. Siegfried Sassoon came to the House of Commons

and gave his view of the situation. His comments then were entirely accurate in respect of our position now. He stated, as a serving soldier:

"I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it".

That is exactly true now. This war could come to an end. We could leave, but we cannot do so because we have to protect the reputations of politicians. Our mouths are bandaged by the fear that the incompetence of the invasion of Helmand and the stupidity of our unattainable policies ever since would be exposed. If we left, the dying of our soldiers and the Afghans would end. There is no easy deal, but there will be a deal eventually.

Mr. Lewis: Following that line of argument, if we were doing the populist thing rather than the right thing, and if we were considering the polls at this stage of the mission, we would leave Afghanistan. However, politicians on both sides of the House who believe in the mission believe that we need to stay there because we are doing the right thing. It would be politically expedient to leave tomorrow, and we might gain some short-term political support, but would that be the right thing to do for our long-term stability and security? That is the question that my hon. Friend has to answer.

Paul Flynn: If the Minister thinks that this debate has anything to do with populism, he is wrong. I have been saying these things since 2006.

Mr. Lewis: That's not what I said.

Paul Flynn: Let us say what the position is. The public feel strongly that we should be out—71 per cent. in the last poll—and it is the same throughout Europe. It is the same in France and Germany. But this is not about populism. Of course we should always do the right thing, but when have we done the right thing in this war? When have the Government been right? When has their assessment been correct? I cannot remember any claim that they have made that has been correct or true.

We cannot get rid of corruption, and it is stupid to pretend that we can do so in the next six months just by wagging a finger at somebody. We cannot turn the Afghan army and police into something like the Swedish army. It will not happen; those are impossible claims. We cannot alter the nature of the whole country of Afghanistan when we are in only one province.

We are in Afghanistan for political reasons. The President of America is in an awful position because of his political need to placate both sides, including the rednecks and the Republicans who suspect a President with his character and name, but he has also given the hope of an exit strategy because he knows that it has to come eventually.

Could what happened in Vietnam, which some hon. Members may not remember as well as many of us do, be repeated? That was a country that had to be saved. It was a war that was impossible to lose because, if it was lost, there would be a domino effect and every other country in south-east Asia would become communist. The Americans should have done a deal and walked out with some dignity.

We can still do that in Afghanistan. We can still do a deal which might well consolidate some of the gains made, and which might mean that our friends are not slaughtered when we leave. We could walk out after doing that deal or we could run out in panic as the Americans did from Saigon because of the public's disgust at the coffins that were coming home and their refusal to see a strategy that made any sense.

Our new strategy does not make sense, and that was exactly the case in the last year of the first world war. I speak about this with some interest because my father was shot on 10 April 1918. Happily, his life was saved by a German group who stopped him bleeding to death. He was in that war, and his life was ruined by it.

Siegfried Sassoon, who had an honourable record in that war, stated in this House:

"I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it...I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

That is exactly the situation now. He went on to state:

"I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed."

Our men are being sacrificed now, and they will be sacrificed in the future. Our aim should be to bring our soldiers home, stop believing in impossible ends, and bring an end to the bloodshed of our soldiers, fellow NATO soldiers and Afghans.

10.7 am

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this important debate, considering the many announcements that have been made not only in the UK but in the US in recent days. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) on securing this debate, although I find myself not entirely agreeing with everything he says. He has been consistent in his views—that is for sure—but I believe that he lives in a different world if he thinks that a sudden and quick withdrawal of British, American and allied troops from Afghanistan would somehow lead to peace there and a decline in the threat here. We are there for a reason: we are there as a consequence of recent actions, and we are there with the approval of the United Nations and, indeed, the elected Afghan Government as well.

Paul Flynn: Elected?

Mr. Ellwood: Yes, absolutely. I correct the hon. Gentleman who suggests from a sedentary position that the Government were not elected. They were elected.

I shall not stand here and say that everything is running correctly, or that I entirely support the Government. Indeed, I have been critical of their strategy, which is changing yet again. It cannot be right that we are in a war half a decade after we ventured into Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there is a similarity with Iraq: whatever the reasons, which we can debate separately, for making the initial incursion, there needs to be a better process of moving from war to peacekeeping.

The UK does not have a strong post-conflict capability, which is a shame, because that is exactly what was needed in the aftermath of March 2003 in Iraq. Nobody

[Mr. Ellwood]

took responsibility for the umbrella of security that was created by the military, and the same thing happened again in Afghanistan. We cannot expect, particularly with the technological advances in our war-fighting capability—force multipliers, as they are called—to take aeroplanes and a high-tech armed force to defeat a low-level, low-tech armed force, and then expect employment, governance, rule of law and security to be created on their own. We lack that capability. We have a serious problem with the relationship between the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development. DFID does a fantastic job tackling poverty, which is its first remit, and it was never expected to take on the fairly new responsibility of stabilisation. So there are questions to be asked about how we can improve that situation, although perhaps those are for another debate.

The hon. Member for Newport, West is certainly right to pose thoughts about what sort of country Afghanistan is, because only by studying it and understanding the people can we work towards a strategy that fits with their desires and ambitions. Afghanistan is a fascinating country—even calling it a country is perhaps a bit advanced—that is a mixture and a wonderful grouping of ethnic alliances and tribes. Over the last 2,000 years, going back to Alexander the Great, it has been the location of, or battlefield for, various incursions from the Persians on one side, the British from the other and the Russians from the north as well, all scrapping over this piece of land that contains groupings that have never really been aligned. After so many years, how can we suddenly expect to impose a western-style centralised Government on a place that has never had one? Not even during the long reign of Mohammed Zahir Shah was there any remote sense of centralised operation. There was certainly a big chief—in the 1830s that would have been Dost Mohammed, who was at that stage in the capital at Kandahar, rather than Kabul—and the other tribes would simply accept that there was a tougher, bigger more powerful leader in another location. But when Dost Mohammed died, having kicked the Brits out after they invaded, there was a squabble that involved the deaths of a number of his cousins before a successor was finally strong enough to be respected by the various tribes—and so life would go on. In the same way, when Henry V suddenly became king, for example, a bellringer would wander into a village in England and the villagers would just accept that over towards London there was now a different king and somebody else was in charge, but life would continue on merrily.

Why are we suddenly trying to impose a centralised Government, with everything being Kabul-centric and focusing heavily on President Karzai who has absolute issues with corruption? Why are we not pushing for a more federal model? It is curious that the Americans had a huge hand in developing the Bonn accord, which was the blueprint for the constitution of Afghanistan. America has an interesting model. Those who are familiar with that country will know that every state has the power to hold its leader—the Governor—to account and to make its own decisions separate from what happens nationally. Considering the wonderful tapestry in Afghanistan of different groupings—Hazaras, Baluchis, Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks—why did we not go down the road of a more federated autonomous basis, similar perhaps to the United Arab Emirates, which has seven different fiefdoms that come together when there are national issues to be discussed, but have a sense of responsibility? In the 1950s and '60s, Afghanistan was like that. The area containing Nimroz province, Kunduz, I think, Kandahar and Helmand was all controlled by one individual and there were about seven or eight different groupings of provinces that allowed a sense of rule in Afghanistan. Perhaps we need to use that model. If all the money is poured into Kabul and it is expected to trickle down into, for example, a little village outside Musa Qala, that will not work. That is the first governance issue that needs to be addressed as we approach a change in strategy.

Mr. Drew: But does not that make fighting the war even more difficult? Because there is no homogenous enemy, people just keep changing sides. Whatever wins we have in one part of the country—this has always been the difficulty—are compensated for by people changing side in another part, which shows the complete folly of our being in Afghanistan.

Mr. Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes a point that I cannot disagree with. That is why a vision is needed about where the country, or the region or the locality, is going. People who live in Gereshk or Lashkar Gah do not see Kabul as the capital city and do not understand the decisions that are made. In fact, for many Afghanis living in their villages the word "ferengi", which is used for foreigners, also applies to the people living across the other side of the valley. Of course, there is a bond—the Pashtunwali code—that links all the Afghanis together, but the tribal instinct links those communities together, not a sense of belonging to Afghanistan as a state, because it has never been one.

My next point is about economic vision. When I go to Afghanistan, I ask, "What is the grand plan? What is the vision for the country? Where are we going in the long term? What are the plans for railway lines, for example?" Whatever widgets Afghanistan makes, we have to get them out of the country and into the international markets. Hon. Members mentioned that probably the only secure way of moving goods about is by aircraft. There is a workable railway line from Karachi on the Pakistani border, which is where we bring in our logistical gear from, all the way up to Spin Boldak, which is 40 miles away from Kandahar. Would it not be great if we linked that railway line—built by the British, oddly enough, to bring munitions to the fighting in Afghanistan 100 years ago—into Kandahar, so that the agricultural products, other than poppies, that people are growing can reach the international markets?

Mr. Lancaster: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Ellwood: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster), who has a lot of experience in Afghanistan.

Mr. Lancaster: This links to an earlier point that my hon. Friend made. If we are critical of some of the Government's strategy, it is of the artificial timetable that has been imposed. Yes, we want to build capacity in regional governance. The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development is a good ministry, where genuine capacity has been built. However, I remember meeting

the head of police in Lashkar Gah, where suddenly UK funding was cut off on 1 April and he was told to seek funding from Kabul. There was not capacity in the system to allow that funding to come down. Rather than focus on artificial dates, we should focus on capacity and transfer funding only once mechanisms are in place.

Mr. Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I hope that the Minister listens to him, because he has experience in these matters: not only has he served in the armed forces but he has spent a lot of time in Afghanistan and seen these things first hand.

There would be a huge danger in packing our bags and turning our backs on Afghanistan. I say this as one who has been personally affected by the Bali bombing as well as 9/11, having been born in the United States. The hon. Member for Newport, West did not really touch on what would happen to Afghanistan as a whole or on the impact of the Taliban. If he thinks that the Taliban groupings, or leadership and followings, would not be a recruitment ground for al-Qaeda, in the absence of an international security force, he is hugely misled. The bigger consequence is that there will be a knock-on impact on neighbouring Pakistan. He says that they are two different countries, but he knows that when Pakistan gained its independence in 1947, the federally administered areas were just parked to one side and were not embraced within the constitution of the new country. It was regarded as being a little bit difficult and people said, "Oh, we're not really going to bother with these tribes up there on the border line. You guys crack on and do your own thing." Those places have now become the haven, probably, for Osama bin Laden and others. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that the issues in southern Afghanistan—Taliban-led—would not spill over into that area and then into Pakistan as a whole, which has nuclear weapons, he is sorely misled. That is the danger that we on the official Opposition Benches need to be concerned about.

Paul Flynn: The hon. Gentleman spoke too briefly. He agrees that the Taliban have control of 80 per cent. of the country, but they have not invited al-Qaeda back. They have the greatest vested interest in ensuring that al-Qaeda is not in the country again because it caused the Taliban to lose control of the Government.

Mr. Ellwood: First, al-Qaeda is not there for a tactical reason. It can easily move into an area where ISAF—the international security assistance force—is not, which is the Pakistani border. There must be concern about that, and it must be discussed, which is why we link Afghanistan and Pakistan together.

I correct the hon. Gentleman again, as I did during an intervention. The Taliban do not have control of 80 per cent. of the country, and his statement was misleading, because 80 per cent. of the population of Helmand province live in 20 per cent. of the Helmand valley, and it is in that 20 per cent. that we concentrate our forces. The rest of the area is desert, and to say that the Taliban have control of the desert and are moving around suggests that we have no control over Helmand province. There is no one there, and if the Taliban wander around, they can do so. We do not have control over that.

It is important to have this debate, but where the hon. Gentleman wants to go is extremely dangerous and goes against the grain of international concerns and our international responsibility to keep terrorism at bay.

10.21 am

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) on securing this debate. We need many more such debates, and Members of Parliament should study and scrutinise Government policy in this area ever more diligently. Indeed, a fault of my colleagues and I is that we have not done that for many years, partly because our attention was dragged off to Iraq where so many dangers and disasters happened with the knock-on impact on the Afghanistan mission.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the matter today, and to challenge the consensus. However, I disagree with him, as he knows from listening to our debates on the Floor of the House, because the objectives of the mission are extremely important. Those set out by the Minister and others should be pursued by the international community. Withdrawal now would be disastrous. One has thought long and hard about whether that is an option, but the more one considers it—and not just the impact on the people of Afghanistan, the stability of Pakistan and the fight against terrorism—the more one realises that one must find a way of achieving success in the mission, even if that success is defined rather more modestly by lack of failure.

We need to consider what President Obama said last week at West Point. Some of what he said was welcome, and he was clearly strong on the military side, but I am afraid that I was disappointed by the lack of detail on the political side. There was little reference to the political strategy that I and my colleagues have argued is critical if we are to avoid failure in Afghanistan. General Stanley McChrystal's plan had a huge focus on the political side, and he argues that the military side alone is completely insufficient and inadequate. A strong political direction is needed, and I welcome what the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have said during the past two or three months because they have begun to spell out in detail that sort of political strategy. The lack of that in what President Obama said worried me.

I hope that the Minister will be able to elucidate for hon. Members why President Obama did not go into detail on the political element. Perhaps in the testimonies that we shall no doubt read from Secretary of State Clinton on the Hill and others in due course we shall see that political dimension described in more detail. Clearly, it was in the white paper published by the White House last March, but it was not in the West Point speech. Perhaps when speaking to a group of cadets at West Point, the details on the political side are not discussed, but Obama needs to focus not just on the domestic and military audience, but on the international audience. We must all be convinced that he has the right strategy after so much deliberation.

I want to press the Minister and his colleagues to reassure us over the next few weeks that the political dimension is at the heart of what the Americans want to do and how they are leading the international coalition.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

In the run-up to the London conference at the end of January there is a space to ensure that that strategy exists.

I have discussed the matter previously, and will try not to reiterate what I have said, but the importance of putting pressure on Karzai—the Prime Minister is particularly committed to that—will require getting rid of some of the governors who have been corrupt, because one cannot build on a rotten base. That needs a Loya Jirga, which President Karzai talked about in his inauguration speech, to have real constitutional reform to build up power and governance at local level. It also needs a plan B to be articulated, because we cannot simply wait for Karzai if he does not deliver quickly. That might mean bypassing central Kabul and going directly to those on the ground and getting the money to those on the ground, as the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) said, and to local district governors who can deliver. Karzai must know that he is not the only show in town.

I have talked a lot about the local political dimension. The need for reconciliation was crucial to McChrystal, but the President mentioned it in only a single, almost offhand remark. General Petraeus brought in the British Lieutenant-General Sir Graeme Lamb and puts a lot of store by that, so one hopes that that is still in the strategy. We must debate the process of reconciliation more because it is an incredibly tough strategy, and as tough as fighting. It is not an easy strategy, and it needs a military side to enable us to persuade the Taliban that they should come over, but it needs a multi-layered approach at local, district, provincial and national level.

The Americans are unwilling to talk to the Taliban leadership, but that must be on the agenda, not necessarily because they are likely to agree to a settlement that we could accept—they probably believe that they are winning—but clearly feelers need to be put out to Mullah Omar and others to ensure that the ground is being prepared.

The Taliban that we hear about are an incredibly complicated group of people. I and many others have talked about the $10-a-day Taliban, the local Taliban and the jihadist Taliban. I am trying to get through a detailed book that has recently been written called "Decoding the New Taliban", which is a series of essays by experts on Afghanistan and the Taliban. One chapter refers to the Taliban caravan and quotes an academic, Bernt Glatzer, who talks about different people. Even the Afghans have many different names for the different types of Taliban: Taliban-e jangi, the fighting or insurgent Taliban; the Taliban-e darsi, the madrassa or student Taliban; the Taliban-e asli, the real Taliban or clean Taliban; the Taliban-e Pakistani, who are there just to do Pakistan's business; the Taliban-e duzd, the thief Taliban; the Taliban mahali, the local Taliban; the Taliban-e khana-neshin; and the Taliban sitting at home. Those are all disaggregated by other adjectives, including the concept of majbur Taliban, the forced Taliban, and the naraz Taliban, the dissatisfied Taliban.

If we are to understand how to reach out and integrate people, we must understand the culture and the different types of Taliban far better than we have until now. It has been a huge failing by hon. Members and probably the Government and the international community not to understand the complexity of that society. We have been omnipresent, and have given the impression that we can go in and solve everything, but we cannot. We must understand the Afghan and Pakistan people, and the people of the region from where they are, not from where we think they should be. That is the only way we can be successful in reintegrating and reconciling.

We cannot take comfort from the idea that the Taliban are unpopular because they are nasty people. Nasty insurgents can take power, and they did. They can impose their power through coercion. They do not have to be popular to rule or to take ground. It is no good us saying that the Taliban are unpopular so we will be okay. The matter is far more complicated.

We must understand the process of reconciliation. In the past, there have been two big findings from looking at people who have been brought over. Some were brought over, but were then badly treated by the Afghan Government or the Americans—some were taken off to Guantanamo Bay. That is not an incentive for people to come over in the future. Others who have come over and tried to join the Afghan mainstream have been assassinated by the Taliban or their families have been killed. The process of reintegration and reconciliation is difficult and fraught with dangers, but I believe that it is the best way forward. If we manage to do that, we will help Afghanistan and the Afghan people. We must understand how to do that in more detail than there has been until now.

I will conclude by talking about the other political dimension that was missing from President Obama's strategy as laid out at West Point. I am sure that he is an intelligent, sophisticated man—I am sure it is somewhere there, but we need to see more sign of it and of the international dimension. People on all sides have talked about the importance of the regional peace settlement. I, together with other hon. Members, have asked Ministers to ensure that Russia and China, and possibly other countries, are represented at the London conference. It would be ideal to see Iran there. Clearly, there have been lots of talks with India and Pakistan, and the significance of that is well known.

I was interested to read in the Foreign Secretary's blog a call for a Marshall plan for Pakistan. That is exactly right. When one looks at the international dimension, Britain has a particular role in Pakistan—even more than in Afghanistan—and that area is clearly one of our main objectives. We must think more about and debate how we can help the people of Pakistan, not only against the threat of terrorists who are murdering people in the cities almost every other day with outrageous bombs, but with development issues. For example, Pakistan has a massive water problem. If we can deal with its water infrastructure and assist agriculture in villages and small towns, that would be a massive step forward and win us real plaudits from the Pakistani people. We would win hearts and minds, and that is the sort of approach that we need.

My concern about the Pakistan peace is that there is a parallel with Iraq. For Iraq, the then Prime Minister said that it was all about the middle east. He said that there would be a peace process for Israel and Palestine, which was why we should support the invasion of Iraq. He said he had twisted the arm of the American President to get peace in the middle east. What happened to that? Absolutely nothing.

The current Government say that they will pursue the political strategy laid out so well by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and that they will persuade the Americans to do more in Afghanistan. However, we must also be the strongest friend possible to the people of Pakistan. We must help that country move forward. If we can do that, we will really have achieved something. This will be well worth while and we will bring peace.

Mr. Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is about to sit down, so I thought that I would seek clarification. As with so many other things, he seems to be positioning himself firmly on the fence, although he is likely to slip one way with a commitment to Afghanistan. The speeches that others in his party have made seem to be generally supportive of troops in Afghanistan, although they are now rowing back from that. My concern is that as we approach the general election, the Liberal Democrat position will be to call for troops to be withdrawn from Afghanistan. I seek clarity on that issue, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman can put it on the record.

Mr. Davey: I do not think that I could have been clearer. Certainly, Ministers have recognised our position during debates. The Secretary of State for Defence went on the record and criticised his own side for trying to make those sorts of comments, and the hon. Gentleman does not help the debate by his suggestion. The Liberal Democrats have been clear from day one about our support for the mission and its objectives. However, we have not allowed ourselves not to criticise the strategy. This is not simply about political matters such as troop equipment and supporting our forces, but about how the overall strategy has developed. We have been deeply critical for a long time about how the strategy has developed, because of the lack of a political dimension that I have mentioned today and in previous speeches.

I am still critical. The Government seem to have the right approach, and I commend them—they are developing the strategy, and I could hardly be more supportive of what they have been advocating, but my concern is that the Americans are not there yet. That does not mean that we should call for a withdrawal of troops. It means that we will retain our critical faculties and keep pushing at the points that need to be raised, so as to ensure that this is a successful mission.

10.35 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (C[illegible]): a delight to serve under your chairmanship, [illegible]May I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) on raising this debate? As I listened to him, I wondered, rather like Churchill and his comment on the pudding, whether there was a theme. As far as I could see, the theme had two parts: first, why is the UK in Afghanistan and particularly in Helmand province; and secondly, that the answer to the difficulties being faced in Afghanistan is to bring our soldiers home. The hon. Gentleman raised such questions quite legitimately, although I disagreed with the answer.

I was also struck by him calling Siegfried Sassoon in aid. When I had a real job before becoming a politician, I did a little work and writing on the Royal Welch Fusiliers during the first world war. The hon. Gentleman might have forgotten that although Siegfried Sassoon criticised the war in 1917, he returned to regimental duty where he was known as "Mad Jack" because he went into no man's land and was an expert personal killer of German soldiers. He fought honourably to the end of the first world war and his attitude towards war and soldiering was, I think, ambivalent to say the least. It is always doubtful to call him in aid to support arguments about contemporary conflict one way or another.

Paul Flynn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Simpson: As I raised the subject, of course I will give way.

Paul Flynn: I am well acquainted with the military career of Siegfried Sassoon at Mametz Wood, where he fought with Welsh regiments. What happened in those areas is a matter of great interest in Wales. However, does the fact that he saw himself as a loyal, faithful soldier not add more authority to his actions? He risked being jailed for the declaration that he made. It still rings true. Please do not try the ad hominem approach. The words apply precisely to our situation now.

Mr. Simpson: I will beg to disagree. Both my grandfathers served in the first world war, and they had no doubt as to why they had volunteered and served. The peoples of Belgium and northern France were only too well aware of the reasons why they were fighting in the war. Siegfried Sassoon was never going to be tried because the Army would never have been stupid enough to do that; particularly following the intervention of his good friend and regimental comrade, Robert Graves. Perhaps we can debate that at another time.

This debate is about the strategy in Afghanistan. However one likes to define it, in simple terms, a strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve a particular goal. There is no doubt that we can wind the film back, and say that over the past eight years we have seen a series of failures by the United States of America, the United Kingdom and NATO to have a clear policy and strategy from which everything else flowed. There are reasons why we should be in Afghanistan, and I am not going to repeat all of them. Many hon. Members from both sides of the House have been at debates or briefings in the Foreign Office, and we have raised the issues. We cannot wish ourselves back to where we were eight years ago, so we must make the best of what we have.

The hon. Member for Newport, West made a crucial point. Without the support of public opinion, it is difficult to execute and implement the strategy. There is no doubt that public support for British troops in Afghanistan has declined over the past nine months for lots of reasons. First, there is the lack of a clear strategy, and secondly there is the drip, drip, drip of casualties. The hon. Gentleman was right to talk not only about deaths, but about the physical and mental casualties. However, if we looked at casualties alone, however personally horrendous for individuals, it is likely that at different times in our history we would not have pursued strategies of one kind or another.

There is a supreme irony that perhaps some of the casualties that we are sustaining now are due to General McChrystal having restrained the use of air power and ground fire power because he is concerned about its impact on Afghan civilian causalities. Our servicemen and women understand that. They are only too well

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aware of that balancing act, and have perhaps more grit and determination about it than we do.

However, the onus of responsibility must be on the Government to explain their policy. Although I accept that Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup and others are saying that the negative aspect of the debate—the casualties and the comments made by Members of Parliament and the media—undermines the morale of the troops, I do not accept that that is a reason why we should not have such a debate or, indeed, why the hon. Member for Newport, West should not raise these questions. It is the duty of the Government to provide the arguments about why we are in Afghanistan, why we are taking casualties and why, as the military themselves have accepted, we may, at least in the short term, end up taking more casualties.

Mr. Ellwood: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case for the importance of exposing a strategy. Does he agree that it would have been helpful not only to the House but to the nation if we had had regular updates—quarterly updates—from the Prime Minister on what is happening in Afghanistan, to ensure that we keep the British nation on side in understanding why we are there and the progress that is being made?

Mr. Simpson: Yes, I do. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), who speaks on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, has already made that point, as have a number of Government Members. The Prime Minister has missed an opportunity. If, before Christmas, he had had a major debate on Afghanistan—in which he had, with support from Ministers, set out all the arguments—with both the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the Government would have been in a stronger position. I hope that in the new year the Government will think again. That might well be in the aftermath of the London conference. I certainly agree that regular updates beyond the occasional statement would help to advance the arguments.

There are a number of questions to be raised about the strategy. I will not repeat some of the excellent points made by hon. Members on both sides of this Chamber. I shall concentrate on three or four questions. The first relates to the difficulty at present of measuring what success is. Along with many other hon. Members, I am concerned that both President Obama and, at one stage, the Prime Minister seemed to be giving the impression that there was a series of timelines of one kind or another. That might feed into the suspicion, raised by the hon. Member for Newport, West, that that had more to do with mid-term elections and the general election than with real success. To be fair, certainly the Secretary of State for Defence has rowed back from that, but the Government need to explain much more clearly how we demonstrate what success will be. Some of that will be beyond the control of the United Kingdom Government or the Prime Minister. I think that three issues are crucial in the immediate short term as far as the Government are concerned. The first is the London conference.

Paul Flynn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Simpson: Reluctantly, I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will excuse me. I have only a few minutes left and we want to leave time for the Minister.

The London conference will be crucial, and not only because of the attempts to bring everybody there, which raise the danger that it will be an enormous political bazaar. The most crucial figure will be President Karzai, who, going by his previous track record, has the mental approach of an old British Army quartermaster—I may be denigrating that fine body of men—which is called "consent and evade". The quartermaster says, "Yes, sir, I absolutely agree, sir. This will be done" while thinking, "He'll never remember and I don't have to do very much about it." President Karzai's consent and evade will no longer be acceptable. The pressure that needs to be brought to bear on President Karzai from now on is along the lines suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood): he will have to face the fact that there must be a devolution of power. There will have to be some form of federal government in Afghanistan. That goes with the grain of Afghan history. He will also have to recognise that without it, his long-term success will be incredibly limited. That is the first point.

The second point that will be important is to involve the regional powers, particularly Russia, China, India and Pakistan. That will not be easy, given the mutual antipathy and the mutual contradictions of one kind or another, but those countries are beginning to see that it is no longer in their interests that this conflict goes on for five, 10 or 15 years, and that instability in that area overruns into other areas in one way or another.

The third element, which is crucial and comes under the strategy, is the impact that these operations will have, politically, economically and militarily, on the United Kingdom. Our need to provide the resources over the next three or four years will put enormous pressure on the UK economy and, in particular, on the three main Departments: the Foreign Office, which has a tiny budget and only a limited number of personnel; DFID, which has a much bigger budget but seems to have problems in delivering on the ground; and our armed forces, which are running red-hot. The ability to sustain such operations, which are incredibly manpower intensive, will have to be considered not only by this Government but, probably, by another Government after June next year. I should like to know whether the Minister thinks that the Government are aware of that.

My final point is that I have never been absolutely sure who, to use the awful management term, "has ownership" of Afghanistan within Whitehall. Obviously, the Prime Minister does, but is the lead Minister who ultimately takes responsibility—the equivalent of the chief executive—the Foreign Secretary or the Secretary of State for Defence? The message that many of us get back from many of the people involved in all three Departments, both in Whitehall and on the ground, is that there is a failure in that crucial area. To use the analogy of Henry Kissinger wondering whom he should phone to get a decision out of Europe, if I was an American, I would wonder whom to phone in Whitehall. Who, apart from the Prime Minister, is the lead person? That is about wiring diagrams and delivery, but it is an important part of the element of strategy.

The Conservative party supports the Obama strategy. We also support what the Government are trying to do. The Government recognise, however, that we retain the right to press them, and to ask the difficult questions.

Indeed, I hope that the Prime Minister will take the opportunity to have a formal debate on Afghanistan in the new year.

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) on securing this important Adjournment debate. I find it difficult, though, to agree with virtually any part of the contribution that he made. That will not come as a surprise to him. He expressed the notion that the threat to national security was entirely non-existent and contended that it would be impossible to achieve any sense of stability in Afghanistan. I can subscribe to neither of those views.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Lewis: I have no time to give way.

Paul Flynn: You have distorted what I said.

Mr. Lewis: I will give way briefly.

Paul Flynn: That is an utter distortion. Of course there is a threat from terrorism, but it comes from Pakistan and it is home grown—it comes from this country as well—and it is made worse by our intervention in Iraq and our intervention in Afghanistan. To suggest that I said that there was no threat is untrue.

Mr. Lewis: I shall not quibble with my hon. Friend at this stage. I urge him to go back, though, and look at *Hansard* and the tone of his speech when he dismissed, and accused us of inventing almost, the threat from al-Qaeda, aided and abetted by the Taliban in Afghanistan. That threat is the reason why we went there and why we must never allow it to return to Afghanistan. That is at the core of our mission.

The contributions made by the hon. Members for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood), for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster) and for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) were balanced, reasonable, very well informed and helpful at this stage in terms of the mission that we face.

Hon. Members will understand that I want to begin by paying tribute to each and every member of our armed forces who has been killed or injured in Afghanistan. The deaths of 100 brave servicemen and women this year and 237 since the operations started are nothing short of a tragedy. Nothing can ever compensate for the loss felt by the loved ones and colleagues of those who have laid down their lives for this country. We owe them a debt of honour and must always remember them. We know that there has been a tragic recent death, and our thoughts and prayers are with that serviceman's family at this difficult time.

Our reasons for being in Afghanistan are consistent. Like the 42 other countries that are there, we are there to safeguard our national security. As I said, our forces are there to prevent the return of al-Qaeda, aided and abetted by the Taliban. The only way to achieve that is to create a stable and secure nation.

We warmly welcome President Obama's speech of last week and the announcement that the US will send 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. As the President made clear in his speech, the current increase in US forces is designed to enable the Afghans to step up their activities on a number of fronts.

As hon. Members are aware, the UK Government have already announced an additional 500 troops and we will make permanent the additional 700 troops we provided for the summer, including in the election period. That takes UK forces to more than 10,000.

Hon. Members mentioned support for Pakistan, which is vital. As has been said, Afghanistan and Pakistan are very different countries, but they require complementary policies. We need Afghanistan and Pakistan to work together on the shared problems of terrorist activities, narcotics, weapons trafficking and the limited economic opportunities. The insurgency straddles the border and so, therefore, must the solution.

Our core strategy remains Afghanisation. The long-term security of Afghanistan and our own national security are best assured by training the Afghan police and army, by building up civilian government at the national and local level and by providing for economic development that gives Afghans a stake in their future. As the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary recently said, and as the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) stressed, we need to combine a military strategy with a political strategy, improving governance, reducing corruption and offering a way back for those who are prepared to renounce violence and choose the political process.

In his inauguration speech, President Karzai laid out five key issues: improved security, improved governance, reintegration and reconciliation, economic development and strengthened regional relations.

Mr. Ellwood: I want to echo a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) from the Front Bench. There is a difference between the £200 million that DFID spends in Afghanistan and the approximately £3 billion that our armed forces spend. That disparity shows how much we are spending on security and how much we are spending on stabilisation, economic regeneration and governance. Does the Minister agree that as long as that huge difference remains, we will not be able to take advantage of the fragile umbrella of security that our military forces are creating?

Mr. Lewis: The development investment that we have put in has made a difference, and I will refer to that later. As development professionals increasingly understand, however, securing security and stability is the precursor to being able significantly to expand development interventions that make a long-term sustainable difference. Indeed, that is right at the heart of the recognition in the recent DFID White Paper of what needs to happen in future development policy in conflict areas. It is, therefore, a question not just of comparing amounts of money but of looking at an integrated strategy and a staged approach that bring together security, governance and development. As a consequence of DFID investment, there has been a significant improvement, but a lot more needs to be done.

I referred to the five areas of improvement that President Karzai laid out. The international community must now work with him to turn those objectives into action and to ensure that his Government deliver on them.

On security, only five of Helmand's 13 districts were under Government control in 2006. Following the end of Operation Panther's Claw, the Government of

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Afghanistan now broadly control 10 of those 13 districts. We want to see a 134,000-strong Afghan army by the end of 2010, including an additional 5,000 troops trained by British forces in Helmand. Afghan national police numbers in Helmand will increase immediately to 4,100, with further increases to follow.

The Afghan national security forces are increasingly contributing to securing their own country. More than 90 per cent. of international security assistance force operations are conducted in conjunction with the Afghan national army, which is starting to take the lead in independent operations. The ANSF have already taken lead responsibility for security in Kabul, but we expect other nations to share further the burden in Afghanistan and we are increasingly confident that they will do so.

Mr. Lancaster: Much of the focus seems to be on building the strength of the Afghan national army, but given the tribal nature of Afghanistan and particularly of Helmand, and given that few members of the army are recruited from the south, does the Minister accept that it is sometimes too simplistic to think that recruiting an Afghan national army is the answer to all our problems, given that its members will be viewed in much the same way as the British Army is in Helmand—as foreigners?

Mr. Lewis: There must be a combination of building up the army and reconciliation and reintegration. As the hon. Gentleman himself said, we must increasingly know about the influences and the elders at the local level, and we must be able to work at that level if we are to be clear about the most effective way to secure security and stability. The Afghan army and police are crucial, but they are not the only interventions that will enhance security.

I need to make rapid progress now. I referred to the expectation that other countries will share the burden of providing security forces.

On governance, we have made it clear that President Karzai has to take action in forming his new Government to demonstrate that he is serious about rooting out corruption, which must be dealt with on an institutional basis. As the Prime Minister has outlined, one key element of that is a fully independent and empowered anti-corruption commission.

As the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East persuasively said in his speech, there is also the crucial question of sub-national governance. Clean and competent governors need clear roles, appropriate training and resources to function effectively. We welcome the Afghan Government's announcement of a sub-national governance reform programme and we will support them in implementing it. We also need better governance structures at village level. Across Afghanistan, the number of community development councils elected at village level will increase within two years, from 22,000 to 31,000. That is an important part of the strategy.

The same is true of the focus on reintegration of those whom we can peel off from the Taliban. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West implied, the majority of Taliban fighters and supporters are not hardcore terrorists, but are motivated by tribal allegiances or simply money—sometimes as little as $10 a day. If we can demonstrate that they cannot win and we can provide those who are prepared to live peacefully with a way back to their communities, we should do so. That has worked with former Talibs, who have now assumed legitimate positions in the Afghan Government, and old enemies now work together in Parliament.

As the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton said, the reintegration process must be led by Afghans, but the international community can and should provide the funding. We are working with our international partners to determine how best to achieve that.

Alongside the military and security strategy, we of course need to ensure that there is economic development so that the people of Afghanistan see a direct benefit in their everyday lives as the situation moves forward. Economic growth this year is due to be 15 per cent., albeit from a low base, and that is an important step forward.

More Afghans are rejecting opium cultivation. This year, poppy cultivation decreased nationally by 22 per cent., and 20 provinces are now entirely poppy free. More Afghans are finding legal livelihoods, and the average income in Afghanistan has almost doubled since 2002.

The Prime Minister and President Karzai have signed a 10-year development partnership to support Afghan leadership of development. Some £510 million of DFID money will be invested over the next four years to support that development.

Hon. Members have rightly referred to the importance of regional development and the role that countries neighbouring Afghanistan will have to play in security. Some progress has been made, with Afghanistan and Pakistan negotiating a trade and transit agreement to facilitate trade. Afghan agricultural produce is regionally renowned. All that could help to undermine the appeal of poppy production to Afghan farmers. We welcome Turkey's offer to host a regional economic co-operation conference in 2010 and we hope that all attendees will contribute positively.

Finally, I come to the London conference. It is crucial that the conference, which will be followed by a Kabul conference in spring 2010, brings together the Afghan Government's commitments and the international community's support so that we have a cohesive and clear strategy focused on the five pillars identified in Karzai's inauguration statement. As the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk said, that will give a clear sense of how we measure progress and how the Government and President of Afghanistan will be held to account. The London conference will be seen as a crucial moment in moving the mission forward so that we can truly create long-term stability in Afghanistan and, having done that, start to bring our troops home.

High-speed Rail

11 am

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): It is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, Mr. Fraser, and it is a pleasure to do so. I am delighted to have secured the debate, which is important to many right hon. and hon. Members of the House, as well as hugely important to the country, not just for transport reasons but for our entire economic future.

I am pleased to say that I was delivered here safely on time, having got a very early train from Leeds this morning by standard mainline rail on, of course, the now publicly owned east coast franchise—may it stay in public ownership for the foreseeable future. I want early in my remarks to express my disappointment that it is not Lord Adonis who will answer today on this important matter. That is meant as no disrespect to the Minister, with whom I regularly correspond: it is simply a matter of the role of Lord Adonis, and the way in which he has personally taken the initiative on high-speed rail and shown an interest in it. We would all agree that it is positive that high-speed rail is very much on the agenda. I hope that today's debate will contribute to that.

We must start by facing the country's abysmal record on high-speed rail. In a meeting with Lord Adonis in his office I looked at the high-speed rail map of Europe, and it shows about 3,500 miles of high-speed rail line on the continent. Yet at the moment in the UK a rather pitiful 68 miles, currently known as High Speed 1, links St. Pancras to the channel tunnel. We need only look across the channel to see how the French have taken the matter forward. The regional economies of places such as Lille and Lyon grow because of the boons for business and tourism, as well as the development of whole industries that are based around the siting of high-speed lines.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): On the crucial point of the siting of lines and the impact for business, does my hon. Friend recognise that if it were announced that high speed would go only as far as Leeds, as the Conservatives have said, the immediate effect could be to encourage business to relocate away from the north-east and east of Scotland? It is very important to get the siting right.

Greg Mulholland: Of course my right hon. Friend is right, and I am sure that other hon. Members feel similarly about their cities and areas.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on obtaining the debate. Obviously, France has a population similar to that of the United Kingdom, and an area three times the size of England, so there are separate issues. However, does the hon. Gentleman agree that high-speed rail, highly desirable though it is, is not necessarily an unalloyed benefit, in that we need to act in parallel with any major investment to improve local transport and protect the environment, and to ensure that the projects integrate with regeneration? In particular we need to make sure that the trips that are generated are not new ones, but transferred ones: modal switch is the name of the game, is it not?

Greg Mulholland: Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman from that point of view, and we must accept that we have a very poorly integrated public transport system in this country. The rail network has never recovered from the disaster of the Beeching cuts. Perhaps we must consider high-speed rail as an opportunity to rectify that. I hope for an improvement in regional railways, stemming from high-speed rail.

The benefits of high-speed rail are many and well documented, and include improved inter-city links with the capital and the great cities of the rest of the United Kingdom. It reduces congestion by encouraging people, as the hon. Gentleman said, to move from the roads on to the railway, and it also reduces the demand for domestic flights. Most of the right hon. and hon. Members present for the debate represent areas outside London, and there are clear benefits of high-speed rail for areas such as Yorkshire, the north-east and the north of England. Overall what has happened on the continent has proved the possibility that high-speed rail in this country would do something to redress the historic economic tilt of the United Kingdom towards London and the south-east.

We have today had an extraordinary announcement on Heathrow, about the third runway apparently ticking the boxes for emissions targets—either that is wrong or the emissions targets are not worth the paper they are written on—but there is nevertheless a real environmental benefit to high-speed rail. That is particularly on people's minds at the moment because of the Copenhagen summit.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I agree that high-speed rail offers the possibility of environmental benefits for the entire country, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that one issue that will need to be faced is that its impact locally may involve serious environmental detriments. A challenge will be how to minimise those, if, indeed, the benefits that the hon. Gentleman identifies are to be perceived widely and shared by everyone.

Greg Mulholland: I was aware from speaking to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) that that important point was to be made this morning, and I am pleased that it has been. I hope that the views in my conclusions will be good news for both hon. Gentlemen.

The Northern Way's evidence has shown that high-speed rail could create £13 billion in wider economic benefits. We have fallen behind our continental neighbours in that respect, and we need to take it seriously and make progress as quickly as possible.

I want to try to throw some light on the various proposals that are on the table, because there is some confusion about them. Four serious proposals are being considered. One is from Greengauge 21. The Government's High Speed 2 quango, of course, has not yet reported, but we have indications of what it thinks. Network Rail came out with a report, and there is also the High Speed North proposal. I want to take the debate forward this morning by briefly outlining those options, and to focus on where high-speed rail should go. The Government have said they are committed to high-speed rail to Birmingham. That might be accepted as the starting point—although for some people it seems to be Heathrow airport, rather than central London, which I consider a

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grave error. High-speed rail will work if it connects London as a city with other capitals. I shall present more evidence about how important that is.

Greengauge 21 has an estimated cost of £25 million per route mile for the first network. The proposal is for, first, a route from London to Birmingham and Manchester, then to Glasgow and Edinburgh, with a dedicated branch into Heathrow airport. Greengauge 21 is an organisation that is very much interested in the project, and proposes a second line going up the east side of the country. There would then be connectivity between the two. However, the problem is that realistically, at the moment, it is a west coast high-speed rail proposal. There are other problems with it, not least that of ploughing straight through the Chilterns. That has already been commented on, and it needs to be taken seriously.

The Network Rail proposals are disappointingly similar. The cost estimate is about £32 billion, again to go from London to Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh. That was in its publication "The case for new lines", which was published earlier this year.

David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way a final time?

Greg Mulholland: I will.

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire puts his point, I remind him that many hon. Members would like to contribute to the debate. He has already made one rather long intervention and as a member of the Chairmen's Panel knows how to go about the business.

David Taylor: I will be very brief. Network Rail does not have a brilliant track record in that regard. It has deferred some rail renewal projects and laid off 1,000 skilled engineers, and from April next year it intends to reduce maintenance and cut a further 1,500 jobs. Will the skills be available to support the new high-speed lines once they are built?

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Network Rail's report was odd in that it did not make a strong case for its proposals apart from saying that the high-speed lines will deal with the greatest need—current capacity—rather than giving genuine economic benefits.

One interesting thing about the Network Rail report is that, like other studies, it firmly states that is not realistic or cost-effective to have an S shape. It seems that the Department for Transport and High Speed 2 are leaning towards going from Manchester to Leeds. However, the time that it would take to get from London to Leeds via Manchester would make it economically unviable. I challenge the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), who speaks for the Opposition. Conservative party policy seems to be for high-speed rail to Manchester and then to Leeds, yet the engineers say that that would not make economic sense.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): One group of engineers has said that; other groups have said different things.

Greg Mulholland: It is rather concerning if that is the best answer that the hon. Gentleman can give to a serious point. I worry that Conservative party policy has been drawn up for its populist appeal rather than as a sensible way of moving the debate forward.

Then we come to High Speed 2, at a cost of £34 billion. Although High Speed Two Ltd has not reported, Government information acquired through freedom of information requests suggests that the line will simply go from Birmingham to Manchester and possibly on to Scotland, ignoring the east side of the country. I have read the studies and spoken to experts, transport policy planners and engineers about them, and the fundamental question that should be asked is not being asked. It is that wherever high-speed rail goes after the initial link with Birmingham, it should be planned on the basis of the greatest economic benefit.

We are dealing with a large amount of taxpayers' money, and we all acknowledge that is a very expensive project that will take some time to deliver. It is vital that what is finally built delivers the greatest value for money, the biggest bang for your buck, the greatest economic benefit, but some of the proposals now on the table do not provide that. Indeed, the information acquired through freedom of information requests suggests a laziness, with people saying that the biggest cities are Birmingham and Manchester and that the line should simply go from one to the other.

I would ask all Members, including the Minister, to imagine a large map of the island of Britain with a red circle around the main centres of population and the key economic drivers. They will see that there is little between London and Birmingham; but there is nothing in the way of an economic driver or a large centre of population between Birmingham and Manchester. Conversely, on the other side of the Pennines there will be a red circle around Leicester, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle. Suddenly the lazy assumption that the line should go from Birmingham to Manchester is shattered. The debate has not focused sufficiently on the key question of ensuring that, wherever high-speed lines are built, they should indeed deliver the most economic benefit.

Lord Adonis wrote an article in the *Yorkshire Post* a couple of months ago in which he said that people must have their say on the matter. However, many on the east of the Pennines have the strong perception that that is not really the case and that the Government have followed the lazy assumption, taking the route of suggesting that the line should go to Manchester. If that is not the case, I ask the Minister to clarify the matter. The city regions that would be served in the west would include Manchester and Birmingham, and possibly Liverpool. As I said earlier, those served in the east would include Nottingham, Leicester, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle if they were linked.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Mole): I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government have not followed any lazy assumptions. We have not followed anything yet, and will not do so until the publication of the HS2 report at the end of the year.

Greg Mulholland: That is a relief. The Minister will understand the worries that resulted from information acquired as a result of FOI requests.

I do not say that we do not get a fair deal in Yorkshire, but I must point out that our region continues to have the lowest transport spending—a lowly £234 per head in Yorkshire against a UK average of £326 and £641 in London. Capital spending in Yorkshire and the Humber is £668 million and in the north-west it is £979 million. Current spending in Yorkshire and Humber is £595 million; in the north-west it is £1,036 million.

The west cost main line has been upgraded at a cost of nearly £9 billion, and that was money well spent. I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Leech); it is right that the people of the north-west should have good transport links, but we too should have them, as should the people of Leicester, Nottingham and all regions.

I was delighted when the *Yorkshire Post* took up my suggestion of a campaign, specifically for a high-speed rail link to Yorkshire. The paper's excellent "Fast Track to Yorkshire" campaign has had real resonance with the region's business community, the public and elected representatives.

We need to move the debate on a little further from saying that the economic case is not sufficiently at the heart of discussions about high-speed rail. We need to go one step further. This is where I may disagree with some Members. Having considered the various high-speed rail proposals, the enormous costs and the huge engineering challenges, as well as the transport policy challenges, I have come to the conclusion that it is not realistic—not in the medium term and possibly not in the long term—to have two lines running between the north and the south.

In an ideal world, it would be wonderful to have high-speed rail throughout the country. As I said earlier, we are unlike France; our country is much smaller. The island of Britain has a smaller landmass. Could there ever be two north-south lines? Some of the debate is focused on that question. I am 40 next year, but—*[Interruption.]* I thank those who think I look younger. According to current predictions, we will not be discussing a second line until I am 70 and there is no real chance of one being built until I am 80. Not only is that a sad indictment of the overly cumbersome way in which we make transport policy, but I have come to the conclusion that those on the east side of the country—I see colleagues here today from the east—are being led up the garden path with the idea that we may get a second line. We hear it said: "Don't worry about it; you may get a second line at some time in the future. There, there; don't worry about it when we make the rather lazy assumption to take the line from Birmingham to Manchester because they are the two biggest cities, even if we ignore the fact that that is not the strongest economic case."

Just to reassure other colleagues I will make it clear again that I absolutely agree that Birmingham should be included; that is an obvious assumption. Manchester, too, should be included. It is a hugely important city, and the economic driver for much of the north-west region. Let me also say to my colleagues in Scotland that we cannot conceive of a genuine high-speed future without Scotland and both the great Scottish cities—the capital and the biggest city, Glasgow—being connected. My point is that it must not, and need not, be an either/or situation.

The one proposal that has not had sufficient consideration so far is the High Speed North proposal, which was the first serious one to come out. It was put together in conjunction with the 2M Group, which opposes the third runway, in July 2008. The proposal is a single line solution that runs through Leicester, Nottingham, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire. It includes Manchester by way of a spur, in much the same way that Birmingham would be a short spur off the main line. The High Speed North proposal uses the M1 corridor, and, although there are huge engineering challenges in delivering that project, there is a real possibility of it happening.

The good news for the hon. Member for Aylesbury and the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who represent areas in or close to the Chilterns, is that because there has been a skewing effect of the Heathrow idea, which threatens part of the area of outstanding natural beauty, it would be more sensible to look at starting and finishing the line in London. Such a suggestion would hugely reduce the impact on those areas and see the line moving across to form realistic corridors through Greater London and into the north. Additional tracks would be required, but I am told that that would not be a problem. After that, we could introduce European-style double-decked trains, which are needed on any high-speed network, to deliver the kind of passenger numbers that are needed.

The overall high-speed rail network could be completed within about 15 years, which is a further reduction in the delivery time of the project, at an estimated cost—all of the costs are estimated—of £33 billion. It is strange that such a project has not been seriously considered. If we considered it, we would conclude that it is realistic to have one line with spurs off it to deliver benefits north and south. If we had a single line going from Birmingham to Manchester, the next step would be to go to Scotland, and not the north-east. After that, what would we then do? It is not necessarily lazy to assume that we would then have one in the east. What about Bristol, Cardiff and other areas of the country? We could open up the south-west. Given the size of the country and the huge investment that would be required, it is simply not realistic to have two lines that run no more than 50 miles apart. I ask the Minister to consider again the proposal and see whether there is a way in which we can have one line delivering benefits to all the regions that could be served by high-speed rail.

Some of us have been stuck in debates about east versus west, north-west versus Yorkshire and so on. My message to all hon. Members is that we should be arguing for one line with spurs that serves all the main economic drivers on both sides of the country—the west and east midlands, the north-west, Yorkshire, the north-east and Scotland. Only that option would justify the vast investment that high-speed rail clearly needs. To plough ahead with one line, serving only Birmingham and Manchester—especially from Heathrow—simply does not make sense. It does not add up or deliver the kind of benefits that we need from such a project.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his thoughtful and well-informed speech. Before he concludes, does he agree that there is a fundamental issue here that high-speed rail, as exciting as it is, must not detract from the very badly needed investment in the classic rail network, particularly the completion of the electrification of the main lines and the improvement in rolling stock that the Government are already committed to?

Greg Mulholland: As the Minister knows, I probably should not get started on discussions about rolling stock in Yorkshire. The hon. Gentleman has a real interest in railways and the rail network, which is not surprising given the area that he represents. Of course he is right, and that matter is absolutely fundamental. Again, this is not an either/or matter. We need real improvements. Clearly my time is limited today. My purpose has been to take on the high-speed rail debate and make it a more realistic one that will deliver real benefits, including to the hon. Gentleman's constituency and city.

I would be very pleased to work with hon. Members from across the House, in particular with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts), who is here, and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who is not, to show that there is real cross-party consensus in taking forward the matter. We have an interest in wanting high-speed rail links to Yorkshire and the Humber, and we will continue to campaign for that. All of us who are passionate about high-speed rail should now change the focus of our debate.

I ask one question of the Minister. Will he and, hopefully, Lord Adonis meet those involved in the High Speed North proposal, including the engineer Colin Elliff, who has done a wonderful job in bringing forward the matter, to get the proposal firmly on the agenda? We all want to see one thing, which is a genuine high-speed rail network that serves as much of the country as possible. A single line, running from north to south, delivering as much as possible, should be the very first step forward.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): Before I call the next person to contribute, I remind right hon. and hon. Members that six people have indicated that they would like to make a contribution, and I intend to start the wind-ups at noon.

11.27 am

Ms Angela C. Smith (Sheffield, Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland)on securing this timely and important debate. I will not go through the economic reasons or justifications for investment in a second high-speed rail line, because they have already been well made, but what I will say is that HS2 must provide evidence of a strategic approach to the development of the second high-speed network—a network is exactly what we need. We want a plan for a long-term investment in high-speed rail in this country. It must be one that brings together all the major conurbations. The High Speed Rail UK campaign is an alliance of all the major cities. Some 55 per cent. of the nation's wealth is generated by such conurbations and a third of the population lives within them, including London. Despite the differences between France and the UK, our population is on a par with that of France. Although we may be smaller, our population, wealth generation and our importance as an international economy mean that we can draw parallels with France. An investment in a high-speed network that links all the major conurbations, including those in Scotland, in the west and the east of the UK, and in the south-west, is critical to the economic future of this country. I do not want to lay down any kind of imperative as to where the first phase of high-speed rail should go or to say that there should just be the one line, because we have to be realistic. We must be strategic, and have a network laid down by HS2 and agreed by Lord Adonis that will link all the conurbations.

Given the importance of the coming period and the possible contractions in public spending in that period, it is quite unhealthy for the conurbations and for MPs representing constituencies from the east and west of the country to be arguing, in a sense, about where the high-speed rail line should go. If there is a squeeze on public spending, we may well find that it is really important that MPs from Yorkshire work with MPs from Manchester and other parts of the north-west to ensure that we keep our fair share of the spending cake from the Department for Transport in the coming years.

As several colleagues have already said today, it is also really important that we ensure that investment in the conventional rail network is maintained and, if at all possible, increased. There is a real interest in the north in ensuring that the Manchester hub, which is an example of that investment in the conventional rail network, goes ahead. So it is vital that all of us, especially those of us from the provincial cities, stick together in making the case both for high-speed rail and for investment in the conventional rail network.

It is crucial to recognise the economic importance of high-speed rail to shorten journey times not only between northern and Scottish cities and London but between the east and the west of the country. For instance, the economic relationships between Sheffield and Manchester, Sheffield and Bristol and Sheffield and Birmingham are as important as those between Sheffield and London, and they are potentially even more important given the investment that we will receive in Sheffield for generating nuclear research and nuclear capacity. It is not just the link with London that matters; that is a really important point.

I would always support a rail line that takes in Sheffield in the first phase of a strategic network; of course I would support that. For me, it is absolutely critical that Sheffield is linked on such a network. However, whatever decision is made about the first phase, it is really important that markers are laid down at the earliest opportunity to demonstrate a serious intention to develop the rest of the network.

For example, if a decision was taken to build a line that went to Birmingham and then across the country, via Rugby, to Sheffield and Leeds and then further north, it would be absolutely vital to undertake planning work to lay down the parameters and the groundwork to ensure that a line also went through the west of the country to Manchester and to areas further north. So, although it would not be realistic to develop two major rail lines at the same time as part of a first phase, the first phase must be paralleled with the investment to lay down the groundwork for further phases of high-speed rail.

Another example of that type of planning would involve the Woodhead route across the Pennines, which is the obvious choice for a transpennine link. If that route is not part of the first phase of the high-speed network, we must ensure that it is at least safeguarded for the future and for further phases of development. So I would like to hear more from the Minister about

the potential for safeguarding routes that are currently not being used and about the importance of ensuring that early work is undertaken on further phases of high-speed rail.

I will conclude my remarks, because I know that other people want to contribute to this debate, by saying that we must be ambitious on high-speed rail. To be honest, we cannot afford to turn our backs on the opportunity that is now before us for the future of high-speed rail in Britain. There are 3,500 miles of high-speed rail network across Europe and we have just 68 miles of that network. That is absolutely appalling and shows our dreadful record in investing long term in public transport links, including rail links. We cannot afford to say no to high-speed rail and we cannot afford to get our approach to it wrong. Our approach must be strategic and ambitious and, as I said earlier, there must be a network that links all the major conurbations, giving each one the opportunity to develop economically, bringing the country closer together and, if you like, enabling the regions to develop an economic capacity that will allow them to compete with London. I say that for the sake of London as much as for the sake of the regions, because if London continues to grow at the expense of the rest of the country, in the end it will become unsustainable. That would not be good for UK plc.

So we have to invest in high-speed rail; we have to stick together in the regions on this issue, and we have to ensure that we get the decision on high-speed rail right.

11.35 am

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) on securing this debate. High-speed rail is one of those things that almost everybody, whichever part of the country they represent, can happily sign up to as an attractive and valuable idea in principle. The trouble is that, unless and until we reach the stage where we are starting to debate particular route options and the problems and challenges that arise from each of them, we will not start to come to terms with both the benefits and the costs that are involved and we will not be able to assess the benefits and costs of a project of this ambitious scale.

We do not have a route yet. We have all sorts of speculation or informed leaks appearing in the media about what High Speed 2 will produce. We have a model of high-speed rail development that is rather different from Network Rail and we also have the other two proposals to which the hon. Gentleman alluded.

When the Minister responds, I hope that he will clarify one point, which is the timing of any announcement by the Department for Transport. My clear understanding is that HS2 is under an obligation to present its report to the Secretary of State for Transport by the end of the year. In an earlier intervention, the Minister talked about an announcement at the end of the year. My constituents and I want to know whether the Government are looking to make a public announcement at the turn of the year, as the Minister indicated in his intervention, or whether Ministers will study the report for a bit before they make a public announcement.

Chris Mole: I am happy to advise the hon. Gentleman that it is the Government's intention to consider the report. It will be a significant report requiring appropriate consideration. Furthermore, we will obviously want to ensure that it is aligned with any other publications on our national transport corridors.

Mr. Lidington: I am grateful for that somewhat elliptical response from the Minister; it did not seem to clarify the Government's timetable very much at all.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle) (Lab): In the Select Committee on Transport, I recently asked the Secretary of State for Transport about the HS2 report; I asked him if I could get a copy of it under the Christmas tree. His answer was that he would have a copy under the Christmas tree, but it would be a number of months before I could receive a copy, because there could well be planning blight involved.

Mr. Lidington: The hon. Gentleman's account of that Select Committee hearing rather fits with my recollection of a radio interview with the Secretary of State a couple of weeks ago.

I think that I represent a greater proportion of the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty than any other Member of the House and already there is concern in my constituency about reports in the newspapers and the broadcast media that HS2 will propose routes that would plough straight through the heart of the Chilterns AONB. If such routes are indeed proposed, it seems to me that the exercise that I and other Members who represent constituencies in the Chilterns must undertake would be to balance the national interest with the interest of our constituencies. The Government could reasonably ask our constituents to consider that issue too.

Any proposal involving the Chilterns would have to pass two critical tests. One is a financial test involving value for money. Is the very large expenditure of public money entailed by a high-speed rail proposal justified by the economic benefits that would accrue to the nation? Also, would we be able to recoup at least a large part of that investment from various carbon access charges in subsequent years? Part of that analysis must include whether the fares it would be necessary to charge to make a sufficient return on the capital outlay would be affordable for ordinary people in this country. One reason why the abortive Central Railway freight project fell is that it became apparent that the necessary capital expenditure could be financed only on the expectation of freight access charges too high to attract any significant amount of traffic away from the motorways on to the proposed railway line.

The value for money test is particularly important given the point made by the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby). It is inevitable that expenditure of that order—current estimates of the total are between £30 billion and £40 billion—will involve diverting money that might be spent on upgrading other parts of the network, which sorely needs upgrading and modernising at many bottlenecks and pinch points that we could all identify.

Secondly, there is the environmental test. For my constituents, that is of particular importance. My constituency includes an area that is part of both the

[Mr. Lidington]

green belt and the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty. By definition, therefore, it is an area designated by successive Governments as having landscape of national value. There is quite a lot of National Trust land along the valleys of the Chilterns. The Chilterns Conservation Board, the statutory agency charged with protecting the AONB, along with the National Trust, the Chiltern Society and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, is already concerned about the proposals emanating from HS2.

When the report is published, I will want to see evidence of how the environmental balance would be struck. A project of that scale, like any big construction project, will inevitably involve the emission of a great deal of carbon. How will that be placed in the balance? What assumptions will be made about how much carbon will be saved by diverting passengers away from domestic flights and road travel on to the proposed new high-speed rail network?

Mr. Grieve: My hon. Friend is making all the points that I would seek to make if I had time to speak. Does he agree that the project affects not only the Chilterns but, on one showing, the edge of London through the Colne valley regional park? One of the proposed schemes envisages building a Heathrow airport terminal, culverting the Colne along a section of its length and driving the railway line through the heart of the park, which has long been regarded as a key lung of considerable biodiversity on the edge of London. Those things will also have to be factored in—I will be interested to hear the Minister's response—if that is indeed going to be the preferred route.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a telling point in respect of his constituency. Those of us who represent seats in Buckinghamshire are all too well aware that the Government are insisting on the construction of tens of thousands of additional new homes in Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire. One argument—which, in fairness, the Government put forward themselves—is that areas such as the Colne valley regional park and the Chilterns AONB are critical to the Government's vision of sustainable communities where urban development provides residents with access to neighbouring areas of open space in which to enjoy recreational and sporting opportunities. The loss of that rural amenity must be placed in the balance, as must the risk of permanent and irreparable damage to landscape that Governments over the years have defined as being of national significance.

My questions to the Minister are these. First, what arrangements will be made for environmental impact assessments? Do the Government envisage a single assessment for the entire project, dealing with both strategic and local impacts, or will more than one such assessment be done? At what stage in any Government proposal would such an environmental impact assessment be presented? For example, would a full EIA be available to Parliament and the public before the proposal was voted on in the House of Commons?

Secondly, what consultation do the Government plan to hold with people whose personal lives, amenities and local communities could be seriously adversely affected by the construction of a high-speed rail link and who, because the rail link will exist to serve cities and will have as few intermediate stations as possible, are unlikely to benefit very much from its operation?

Thirdly, how will the Government take account of the fact that there is an inevitable relationship between the cost of the project and the provision of measures to mitigate the damaging environmental impact of a new railway line? Cuttings, tunnels and embankments to protect people from noise pollution all cost money. All too often, as I know from having the M40 in my constituency, Governments over the years have cut corners when it comes to protecting people, particularly in rural communities, from the adverse impact of large-scale infrastructure improvements. It would not be acceptable, for example, for all the money for environmental protection to go into tunnelling under London and then for the Chilterns or other rural areas affected to be told that there is no money left to look after their interests. I hope that the Minister will give us some assurances on those points.

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I remind right hon. and hon. Members that there are still six people left to speak in 12 minutes.

11.48 am

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): I will be brief, Mr. Fraser. I support the concept of high-speed rail. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) on securing the debate. We have worked closely on the possibility of high-speed rail links into south and west Yorkshire. I agree that it is important in the meantime to consider other measures such as electrification, track improvements to the midland main line and other improvements for which I have been campaigning, with other colleagues such as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith).

The benefits of high-speed rail are clear. Getting people out of planes and their cars is good for the environment, and the possibility of rebalancing economic growth in this country back to the north is important. It is also important that we have a vision for the long term, not just of a short single line, but of a network for the whole country, and that we plan over 10, 20 or 30 years. We need only look at France and Spain: only six years ago, the train journey from Madrid to Barcelona took me six hours; it now takes two. Soon Spain will have more high-speed track than any other country in Europe. If Spain can do it with that sort of planning, we ought to be able to do it as well.

I certainly oppose proposals involving just one line to Birmingham, or the ridiculous idea of a line going from Birmingham to Manchester and then cutting across the Pennines to Leeds as an afterthought—I cannot possibly be associated with any scheme that treats Leeds simply as an afterthought. Occasionally in the past, Sheffield and Leeds have competed over things; on this occasion, the two cities are united, as are the parties. Any strategic approach to high-speed rail in this country must serve the major cities of the east midlands—Leicester, Nottingham and Derby—and go on into west Yorkshire and serve Sheffield, Leeds and other places. If high-speed rail is to be effective, it must target those major areas of population.

As the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West said, two proposals, each with advantages and disadvantages, would do that. The first is to go straight up the middle of the country. That is a logical way to serve the east midlands and south and west Yorkshire. There would be spurs off to Birmingham and Manchester and the line would go on to Newcastle and Scotland. In terms of population covered against track used and pounds spent, that is probably the most cost-effective option, although I understand that it could divide some of the supporters of high-speed rail who want the alternative proposal to be taken up.

The alternative is the Y option—a line that would go from Birmingham to Manchester, with a spur coming off somewhere near Rugby that went on to the east midlands, south and west Yorkshire and the north-east. If the Y option were taken, it would make economic sense for only one line to go to Scotland, and that would be the north-eastern branch to Edinburgh and Glasgow. I am not sure that there is economic sense in taking two lines to Scotland, but we can have that debate.

My argument is simple: we need a clear strategy from the Government and a commitment, when they make the decision, not to just one short line, but to a network for the country. If the Y line were chosen, I would argue that both branches should be developed in parallel. The eastern side of the country cannot wait until the western line is built for its line to be started. Having such a strategy is important for the development of an industry in this country that can produce the rolling stock and trains and the equipment needed to build the lines. Without that certainty, industry will not invest. It is important that jobs are created, not just through high-speed lines serving the population, but by the generation of economic development through the production of trains, rolling stock and equipment.

11.52 am

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): Mr. Fraser, I will restrict my remarks to a few points emphasising the environment. A lot of good things have been said, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) on securing the debate.

I use the train from Glasgow to London regularly and I enjoy my time on it. Taking the train is cheaper and better for the environment than other forms of transport, but it is certainly not faster. Environmental figures from the Association of Train Operating Companies show that rail transport produces 42 grams of CO_2 per passenger kilometre, road 127 grams and air 144 to 304 grams. I accept that if initially we are to go to Birmingham, that is to do with capacity in south-east England, which must be addressed; but if we are talking about time and, linked to that, the environment, the savings are greater if we can get plane users to switch to rail, and that means running a line to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen much more than to Manchester, Birmingham or Leeds.

There was an interesting discussion yesterday at the all-party rail group about whether we should go for a network immediately, or for a step-by-step approach. I think the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith) was right to say that we need a strategic view, even if we build in stages. When the motorway was built from Glasgow to London, Scotland built it right up to the border but England failed to build the motorway to match it. We must not do that again. I urge real consultation from the start with whatever Scottish Government are in power. If it is going to take until 2025 just to finish the line to Birmingham, there will presumably be many different Governments here and in Scotland before it is finished. There is support from all parties, but there will also be opposition in all parties.

11.54 am

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle) (Lab): I will keep my remarks brief, Mr. Fraser.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) on securing the debate and on his campaigning. It is about 20 years since I started the campaign for the upgrade of the west coast main line. I had black hair at that time and was about 3 stone lighter. The first thing that he must do is keep his seat.

I take exception to one or two points. A high-speed line would not be built to Birmingham to reduce the journey time by 20 minutes—£10 billion would not be spent on that, because it does not make economic sense. The reason for doing it is that it is the start of the high-speed line. The hon. Gentleman was rather lazy in his arguments. When he did not like something, he said that it was a lazy conclusion, but did not go into the issue.

The point is that we need to build a high-speed line because there are major capacity problems on our railways. Whether we like privatisation or not, a lot of people have been travelling by rail and there are major capacity problems. We therefore have to build new lines. If we are to build new lines, we might as well build high-speed lines so that there is a better railway. The capacity problem is in the west, on the lines to Birmingham and Manchester. Beyond that, we can argue about which direction the line should go in. There is a major capacity problem that we need to deal with and that is why we are talking about building a high-speed line. This is not a wish list. We are talking about spending £30 billion to complete one line from London to Glasgow and Edinburgh. That is a lot of money, so we have to justify it. The capacity problem is the justification.

We do not have to forget about the classic, traditional lines. I chair the all-party west coast main line group and our lobbying has been successful. At the moment, speeds on the west coast and east coast main lines are limited to 125 mph. The speed on both lines could be pushed up to 140 mph with little investment. I suggest to people who live on the east coast that their first priority should be to upgrade the east coast main line, because that could bring faster speeds and quicker journey times to London and elsewhere without the need to wait 30 years for the high-speed line, as the hon. Gentleman said. We need to sweat our existing resources better.

We must be careful that those who live on the periphery of London, such as the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), do not block the advancement of the economy in the north. The question of Scotland, as raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason), is difficult. From the Scottish border, it is about 70 or 80 miles to Edinburgh and Glasgow. The question is whether the Scottish Government will have

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the money to pay for that and whether an independent Scottish Government would have the money to pay for it. I doubt that they would.

John Mason: I think that an independent Scottish Government would have a lot of different priorities, and this question is about priorities. If we are putting money into things such as nuclear weapons, there will not be money for railways.

Mr. Martlew: I take it that the hon. Gentleman's party would scrap Trident to build the high-speed line. I am very interested in that because I represent Carlisle, which is on the Scottish border.

High-speed lines work. They work on the continent and High Speed 1 works. However, we must drive down the costs of high-speed lines. There is a very good line from St. Pancras to the channel tunnel, but it is the most expensive high-speed line in the world. We must reduce the costs and make savings. When the policy is decided on, it must be stuck to.

I chaired a meeting of the all-party rail group last night. An hon. Member who is not present said that he would sooner have no high-speed line than one that did not go to Yorkshire. That is the sort of planning and bigotry that has held back the railways in this country for so long. We need a high-speed line, we have to give it some thought, we must get the money to do it and we must do it as cheaply as possible, but in the meantime, we must not forget the lines that we have. I say to the people on the east coast, the upgrade of the east coast main line and the electrification of the midland main line should be their first priorities.

[Mr. Joe Benton *in the Chair*]

11.59 am

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): I will be very brief indeed. I want to put in a plea about the first stage, which hon. Members all agree will go to Birmingham. HS2 still has to report on whether we will have two stops in Birmingham—one in the city centre and one at Birmingham international airport. I want to explain to hon. Members why it is so important that we get a Birmingham international airport stop.

First, the west midlands economy is highly dependent on access to fast communications. We have had the worst unemployment increase in the country and we have suffered worst from the downturn. We are looking for overseas investment and we are having an extension to our runway to facilitate wide-bodied aircraft, so that people can come into Birmingham international and move on south, or to Manchester or further north. That is extremely important and will provide economic benefits for the whole country, not just the region. A high-speed rail link will make Birmingham international airport truly international and, as other hon. Members have said, it will be the first step towards having a better, faster, environmentally friendlier link to the rest of the country.

12.1 pm

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Benton, it is a pleasure to serve under you this afternoon. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) for securing this important and timely debate. As we await the HS2 report, which will no doubt be the Secretary of State's Christmas reading, it is vital to debate an issue that could shape our domestic transport infrastructure for the rest of the 21st century.

It is fair to say that the Government have been slow to get on board in support of high-speed rail. Had Lord Adonis not been made Secretary of State for Transport, I doubt whether the Government would have had a change of heart. Hon. Members will remember the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ruth Kelly), who said only two years ago that

"it would not be prudent to commit now to 'all-or-nothing' projects...for which the longer-term benefits are currently uncertain".

Government inaction and indifference to high-speed rail has resulted in the UK lagging behind the rest of Europe. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-West mentioned, out of 3,500 miles of high-speed rail around Europe, only 68 miles are in the UK, between St. Pancras and the channel tunnel. Hon. Members from all parties will be aware that the Liberal Democrats were the first party to pledge support for a high-speed rail link to the north and beyond. As usual, the Conservatives have limped in at the last minute with a half-hearted proposal.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the run-up to the general election, now is an opportune time for all parties to make a clear commitment to a high-speed rail network throughout the UK that serves all major cities, so that no area suffers from blight?

Mr. Leech: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I am certainly happy to go on record as giving a Liberal Democrat commitment to a high-speed rail network. I hope that the other parties will do likewise.

Understandably, there will be much debate and disagreement about the exact route of a high-speed network, and hon. Members will make the strongest possible case for high-speed rail coming to their own areas. I was interested to hear that the General Synod of the Church of England has stated in a recent resolution:

"This Synod urges Her Majesty's Government...to sustain employment opportunities, further environmental targets and strengthen future economic and social development by implementing the planning and development of a high speed rail line from London to the North-West and Scotland."

I am not sure how that resolution will go down and be viewed in God's own county of Yorkshire.

I do not want to get too embroiled in a debate about the exact details of a network, except to say that we envisage a high-speed rail network, rather than just a line, which will serve and provide access to northern cities and carry on through to Scotland. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith) is absolutely right that Members representing northern cities either side of the Pennines should not fight over which way the line goes; they should work together to ensure that the north, Scotland and other regions of Great Britain receive the same transport funding as the south-east.

Until we know what is in the HS2 report, we are not in a position to talk about the detail of the exact routes. Sir David Rowlands recently told the BBC that a spur north of Birmingham

"would allow both sides of the country to be served...We will tell the government that the preferred option from our point of view is a network that certainly serves Manchester as well as places like Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds and up to Newcastle and one way or another, up to Scotland."

That is broadly in line with our thinking on providing a network, rather than simply a single line, but the devil is in the detail.

There is also the issue of stations. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Lorely Burt) raised the issue of Birmingham international and Birmingham New Street. Of course, there will be a wider debate about whether we ought to consider city centre or airport locations for stations. Clearly, such details will have to be debated thoroughly.

Lorely Burt: May I inform my hon. Friend that New Street is not likely to be an option for Birmingham? We might be able to develop the east side of Birmingham, which is in need of regeneration, in order to facilitate a Birmingham city centre site.

Mr. Le[illegible] thank my hon. Friend for that clarification. I meant to say Birmingham city centre, rather than Birmingham New Street.

The real issue is how we will pay for high-speed rail. Some hon. Members were at the all-party rail group meeting last night at which high-speed rail was discussed. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who has done an excellent job of chairing the all-party rail group and has argued the case for investment in rail over a long period. In these uncertain economic times, there is understandable concern about whether any Government will be prepared to commit the money, particularly for such a long-term project.

In our policy paper, "Fast Track Britain," we have set out in great detail the benefits of high-speed rail and other rail improvements, but we have also indicated how we would start to pay for them. There would be a £30 surcharge on domestic flights— we have been very open about that—and a lorry road-user charging scheme, which would also ensure that foreign lorries paid their way for using UK roads, instead of having an unfair advantage over British hauliers. We would also get more money out of the train operating companies by offering much longer franchises in return for better investment. Currently, train operating companies have little incentive to invest for the future, as they are uncertain whether they will be running services in two or three years' time.

We are the only party to have a costed plan. In the *Manchester Evening News* on 9 September, the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) claimed that the Conservatives have a costed plan. Perhaps the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) will clarify how the Conservatives will pay for their plan. I recall listening to the shadow Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet, at an all-party rail group meeting possibly 18 months ago. She was trying to claim that the Conservatives could pay for high-speed rail out of existing budgets, and still have money for the rest of the network. Is that still the position of the Conservative party? If so, where will the savings be made and what part of the existing rail network budget will be cut?

As for the Government, I suspect that we will have to wait until the Secretary of State for Transport has finished his Christmas reading before we get any commitment to funding HS2, but I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say in his reply. In the meantime, the Liberal Democrat programme for high-speed rail would begin immediately and be rolled out over 15 years. A high-speed network is vital not only to increase capacity, but to encourage more people out of their cars and dissuade them from taking domestic flights, as well as to help drive the economy and growth in the north and Scotland.

Developing a high-speed network would free up capacity on the conventional railway for shorter-distance local travel, as well as for freight. Currently, some local services play second fiddle to inter-city services and, following last January's timetable changes, some local services became less frequent or were lost completely to increase inter-city capacity. Tony Collins of Virgin Trains has highlighted that the west coast will run out of capacity possibly as early as 2015, and certainly by 2020, despite the £9 billion invested in the west coast main line. High-Speed Rail UK estimates that a high-speed rail network could accommodate all the passenger traffic travelling on the west coast, east coast and midland main lines twice over, which would be up to 15,000 passengers per hour in each direction.

Of equal importance is the potential for expanding rail freight. I understand that HS2 is unlikely to recommend carrying freight on any extended high-speed network, but ruling that out at this stage, in my view, would be a mistake. There is little justification for not taking advantage of the network through the nights when passenger services are not in use. Even if we ruled out freight on the high-speed network, freeing up capacity on the existing network would undoubtedly open opportunities for freight on the traditional lines.

There are sound environmental reasons for supporting high-speed rail. The Eddington transport study estimated that it could lead to carbon savings of 500,000 tonnes per year, or 30 million tonnes over 60 years, valued at £3.2 billion. Transport is responsible for around a quarter of all emissions in the UK and, more worryingly, is the only domestic sector in which emissions have risen since 1990.

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I am trying to be absolutely fair about allocating time. It is already 11 minutes past 12 and other Members are yet to speak, including the Minister, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr. Leech: I will quickly bring my remarks to a close.

The other massive benefit of high-speed rail will be to the economy. I rarely agree with Sir Richard Leese, the leader of Manchester city council, but I think that he was spot on when he said:

"The two major challenges facing our next government will be the economy and the environment. A far-reaching high speed rail network that serves the main economic hubs of the UK will help to succeed in both of these areas."

12.12 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I, too, welcome the opportunity that the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) has offered us this morning by

[Stephen Hammond]

securing the debate. It gives me the opportunity to spell out why I believe absolutely that a high-speed rail network is important for this country and why we hope the Government will do a little more than play catch-up in this matter, which is certainly what they are doing at the moment.

We have heard some interesting contributions. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith) made a thoughtful contribution, yet again, on the importance of the strategic network. My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) made the point about routes, which we will all have to address when the High Speed 2 report is published. Clearly, there will be issues about national considerations versus local considerations, and local environmental issues versus national environmental issues. He was right to raise not only the concerns from his constituency, but the argument that the House will have to face when a clearer route is proposed.

I was interested, as usual, by the remarks of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts). He did not want Leeds to be an afterthought, so he must be worried that his Government give no thought to Leeds or Sheffield in their plans. I can only concur with the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who said that the case for high-speed rail is not an end in itself. It must contribute to the economic regeneration, the travel considerations or the environmental considerations of this country.

While I forgive the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West for his less than gracious response to my intervention, I gently say to him that simply claiming that anyone else's argument is a lazy assumption is in itself a lazy assumption. He predicates his argument on the views of Mr. Colin Elliff, whom I have met three or four times. Mr. Elliff is a passionate advocate for his route, but surely the hon. Gentleman must remember that many people think Mr. Elliff's route has several problems and that he, I suggest gently, is a relatively controversial figure in the railway industry.

Greg Mulholland: There are, of course, problems with all schemes that must be dealt with, and it would be dishonest to suggest otherwise. On the hon. Gentleman's other point, can he tell me why the Conservative leader—joint leader in a coalition—of Leeds city council, Andrew Carter, does not support Conservative party policy and wants a direct high-speed link to Leeds?

Stephen Hammond: My understanding, from my conversations with Mr. Carter, is that while he would prefer a direct link to Leeds, presumably as would the hon. Gentleman, he absolutely supports a plan, which is the only plan proposed at the moment, for a service running from a London terminus, with a spur to Heathrow, to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. The hon. Gentleman has advocated a different route today, but I believe that Andrew Carter, with whom I speak regularly, very much supports the plan.

It is worth emphasising that the plan laid out by the Conservative party is more extensive than the one the Government currently propose, or any that they are likely to propose via High Speed 2, if the rumours are correct. We have continually emphasised that we see that development as the first stage of a network. I accept that at some stage other major cities in England, such as Newcastle, and Scotland will want to be connected. Ultimately, we, and everyone in this Chamber, want to see a full national network connecting as many UK cities as possible.

I say to the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Leech) that we, unlike other parties, have sat up and done the hard work on the detailed feasibility study, looking at the data and analysis from several expert sources in relation to finance and construction. Our modelling of projected revenue flows deploys some cautious assumptions on fares, which we have looked at with several operators, to ensure that we do not build a railway that no one can afford to use, because that would be pointless.

I have said before that high-speed rail must be neither an end in itself, nor a totem. It must be there to fulfil the key challenges. There is a desperate need for new capacity. I travelled on the west coast and east coast yesterday, and both were fabulous services—*[Interruption.]* The main line services, indeed. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe mentioned, the chief executive of Virgin acknowledges that there is a need for new capacity. With the west coast main line expected to be full to breaking point certainly within the next decade, but probably much earlier, we face a capacity issue. As the hon. Member for Carlisle rightly said, we will need to build new capacity. Should we build slow routes or fast routes? Surely we should build high-speed routes and concentrate initially on those routes that have capacity problems, particularly when considering the economic benefits.

There is no economic benefit in building a high-speed rail route to Birmingham, but there would be a huge economic benefit of building beyond, and I think that there is a national consensus on that point. Certainly, the economic numbers that we have had verified for our proposal show that connecting Manchester and Leeds to a high-speed network would benefit those cities by billions of pounds. We must layer on top of that the huge potential switch from air to road, as approximately 63,000 flights a year would be taken out if there were a high-speed line connecting London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

Mr. Martlew: The reality, of course, is that flights from Manchester have been devastated by the upgrade of the west coast main line. The real benefit in reducing flights will come when the line is extended to Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Stephen Hammond: I can see that as part of a network, but all I am laying out now is that, with regard to domestic flights and short-haul continental flights, we could take out around 63,000 flights. Whichever party is in power after the general election—I hope that it will be a challenge for a Conservative Minister—it will face the challenge of Air France wanting capacity on our High Speed 1, and we will see a further expansion of that.

Clearly, we must continue to make the case for high-speed rail, not as an end in itself, but because of the need for new capacity, the potential for huge environmental benefits as a result of modal shift and the potential for huge economic benefits through the shrinking of our country and economic zones. We must continue to make the case for a strategic network, wherever we start.

I readily concede that the Government have made huge strides, and Lord Adonis is to be congratulated on his desire for cross-party and national consensus on high-speed rail. That has been a huge change of attitude for the Government, and the message therefore from all parties is that we recognise the benefit to this country of high-speed rail. Sixty-eight miles of high-speed rail—0.007 per cent. of the continental European network—is something that we should be ashamed of and that we should all commit to change.

I hope that the Minister will clarify how the Government see high-speed rail developing in this country beyond whatever proposals come out of High Speed 2, and I would welcome a commitment from the Minister that he and the Government recognise that building a rail line to Birmingham should be only the start of a strategic high-speed rail network. Only if we have such a network will we get environmental, travel and economic benefits for our country.

12.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Mole): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) on securing this important debate. High-speed rail is, without doubt, a hotly debated topic across the country, and I was grateful for the opportunity to hear all the views that have been raised today, including those from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith), the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) and the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason), the common-sense comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) and the views of the hon. Member for Solihull (Lorely Burt). I shall endeavour to respond to all the issues, but, if I do not, they have been heard and will be examined.

Railways across the UK are a success story. We have seen great improvements in the areas that matter most to passengers, including punctuality and reliability. Our priorities for the railway are still capacity, safety and performance. A reliable railway is the single most important requirement of passengers, and it is also important to the wider economy.

Rail punctuality and reliability have improved by more than 10 per cent. since early 2004. The rail White Paper, "Delivering a Sustainable Railway", published in July 2007, specified further improvement during the high-level output specification period to 92.6 per cent. of trains arriving on time by March 2014, a 25 per cent. reduction in delays of more than 30 minutes and, to maintain momentum on safety, a 3 per cent. reduction in the risk of death or injury to passengers and employees by 2014.

The White Paper outlines the single biggest programme of investment for a generation. It does so without imposing new burdens on regulated fares while being able to return to historic levels the demands made of the taxpayer. More than £10 billion will be invested in enhancing capacity between 2009 and 2014, with overall Government support for the railway totalling £15 billion. Without drawing the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West into a debate on this, I can say that we will introduce a significant number of extra carriages on to the rail network in England and Wales by 2014.

The £8.9 billion spent on upgrading the west coast main line has already delivered faster journeys between London, Birmingham and Manchester and beyond, and the December 2008 timetable change has resulted in greater frequency of services to some of our greatest cities. For example, we now have more frequent and faster journeys between Manchester and London, with a train every 20 minutes during the day and average journey times of around two hours eight minutes. Liverpool and Preston to London takes only a few minutes over two hours, and Warrington and Wigan are less than two hours away. Chester is one of the big winners, having a regular hourly service for the first time, with a journey time of just two hours. Services between the north-west and Scotland have also improved as have those to the west midlands.

But it does not stop there. On 23 July, the Government announced a major £1.1 billion programme of rail electrification. The Great Western main line between London and Swansea will be electrified by 2017, the line between Liverpool and Manchester will be electrified by 2013, and we are working to identify other viable routes for electrification.

Turning to the central issue of this debate, high-speed rail in the UK, I would first like to mention that we already have our first high-speed rail line, the £5.8 billion channel tunnel rail link, known as High Speed 1. That significant project opened on time and on budget, and, from next week, HS1 will be used for the full-service Southeastern Javelin service. That timetable change will bring about the biggest change in more than 40 years and will mean an entirely new service pattern throughout parts of Kent, East Sussex and south-east London. It will provide passengers with more than 200 extra trains in the south-eastern region every day, boost capacity by 5 per cent. and dramatically speed up journey times for people using the high-speed services; for example, the journey time from St. Pancras to Ashford will be 38 minutes.

We are planning now to ensure that we are in the strongest position possible to make the right investments in future years to continue developing the rail network. However, we also recognise that the west coast main line will be operating to its maximum capacity by the end of the 2020s, and that a new route might be needed. That is why we have created High Speed Two Ltd to develop a proposal for an entirely new line between London and the west midlands, and to advise on the potential development of a new line beyond the west midlands. HS2 will also provide advice to Ministers on the potential development of a high-speed service beyond the west midlands and consider in particular the potential to extend to Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, the north-east and Scotland.

To pick up on some of the points raised in the debate, I can assure those such as the hon. Member for Aylesbury and the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who are concerned about local environment impacts, that HS2 has carried out detailed environmental analyses at a local level, and its report at the end of the year to the Government will include an assessment and mitigation measures. I can also advise that HS2 has been actively seeking the views of stakeholders from across the country and has engaged directly with interested parties as its work has progressed.

[Chris Mole]

As hon. Members will be aware, the Secretary of State is also keen to understand the benefits that high-speed rail can deliver to the country and has met a range of stakeholders, including several Members of this House, to discuss the issue. I, too, have heard views on high-speed rail, in particular during my summer trip to the north of England, where I met with Nexus, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester integrated transport authorities, all of which were keen to impress on me the value that high-speed services would bring to their economy.

To address a couple of detailed points, I can assure the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West in respect of double-deck trains that HS2 is working to a gauge minimum of UIC GB+ or similar, which will give the flexibility to run duplex high-speed trains on a new line if that is necessary. Of course, that would have freight benefits as well, which I believe addresses one of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Leech).

Several hon. Members said that they wanted a strategy for a wider network, and I can assure them that in our response to HS2's report early next year we will address the question of a strategic view on a wider UK network.

Let me set out why we feel that high-speed rail needs serious and informed consideration. Until recently, Governments considered rail in the UK to be in a state of inevitable and irreversible decline, and they failed to invest in new infrastructure. As a result, today we are behind most other developed countries in building a high-speed rail network. Yet over the past decade, rail has experienced a tremendous renaissance in Britain. High-speed rail has the potential to meet future inter-conurbation capacity requirements and sustainably to transform the transport connections between our major conurbations, with substantial economic, social and environmental benefits.

International experience bears that out. Before high-speed rail, just 24 per cent. of journeys between Paris and Brussels were by train. Since the introduction of a high-speed line between those cities, the proportion of train journeys has more than doubled to 50 per cent., with a huge increase in capacity. In Germany, high-speed rail is so popular that Lufthansa has scrapped flights between Cologne and Frankfurt—little wonder, now that the high-speed line has slashed the 110-mile journey time by train from two hours 15 minutes to just under one hour. Before high-speed rail in Spain, two thirds of journeys between Madrid and Seville were by plane; just one third were by train. With the advent of a high-speed line, the railway now takes 84 per cent. of the market. A similar dramatic change is taking place on the Madrid to Barcelona route, with the opening of the high-speed line between those two cities earlier this year.

I am not sure that we can lay all the credit at the door of the west coast main line upgrade, but it is the case that not that many years ago only one third of the journeys between London and Manchester were made by train, with two thirds being made by plane. Now it is the other way around.

The question is where we in Britain go now. The Department for Transport will receive the report from HS2 at the end of the year, and it is currently envisaged that we will respond early in 2010, at which time the HS2 report will be published. Later in 2010, we intend to consult on the proposed route, with options, between at least London and the west midlands, subject to analysis of HS2's report and decisions thereafter.

We are keen to engage with colleagues in this House on high-speed rail. It is our firm belief that a project of this magnitude, with such long-term investment and planning timelines, will succeed only if we all work together, across parties, on a shared national strategy—

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Heavy Goods Vehicles (Seat Belts)

12.30 pm

Mr. Alan Milburn (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful to Mr. Speaker for the opportunity to have this debate on what may seem a small and somewhat arcane issue of fitting seat belts to heavy goods vehicles. However, on occasion small issues have large consequences and, in this case, it can be a matter of life or death. Normally, discussions about road safety and heavy goods vehicles focus on their role in accidents and fatalities involving pedestrians, cyclists or other motorists. Clearly, there are issues to be addressed in that respect and the Minister is well seized of those. But today I am focusing on a different matter: the dangers posed to the drivers of HGVs whose lorries have not been fitted with a seat belt.

I have called this debate because in July 2007 a constituent of mine, Peter Williams, was killed when the 7-tonne lorry that he was driving crashed near the village of Wolsingham in County Durham. Peter was just 23 years old. According to evidence heard at the inquest into his death, the injuries that Peter sustained were mainly above the legs and on his chest, probably indicating that he had been thrown against the steering wheel before being thrown out of the cab as the lorry plunged down a bank and on to a railway line. The Calor Gas tanker that he was driving dated from 1995. It had not been fitted with seat belts.

After Peter died his mum and dad, Jan and Mark Williams, who are also my constituents, came to see me as their local Member of Parliament. Understandably, they were deeply upset by Peter's death, but what impressed me then and what has continued to impress me over the two years that I have known them is their shared determination and their calm resolve to see some good come out of their family's terrible personal tragedy. At no point have they displayed any rancour or bitterness about what happened to their son. They are a quite remarkable family and I want to pay tribute to them today.

Mr. and Mrs. Williams have worked tirelessly over the last two years campaigning to highlight the need for every HGV on Britain's roads to be fitted with seat belts so that no other family has to endure what they have endured or suffer the loss that they have suffered. I hope that this debate helps the Williams family and helps their campaign; I hope that it raises awareness about the lack of seat belt protection in too many lorries; and above all else I hope that it prompts the Government and the road haulage industry to take action together to save lives.

After Mr. and Mrs. Williams first came to see me, I started looking into this issue and I was genuinely shocked to find that Peter Williams's lorry is not the only one on Britain's roads lacking that most basic safety protection—a seat belt. I had assumed, obviously naively, that every lorry on the roads had seat belts fitted. I guess that most Members of Parliament and members of the public would make the same assumption. By law all HGVs weighing more than 3,500 kg and registered for use after 1 October 2001 have to be fitted with a seat belt. That followed European legislation that we introduced in this place. The problem is with lorries that were registered before 1 October 2001.

I tabled questions to my right hon. Friend the Minister's predecessor as a Transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Jim Fitzpatrick), to gauge the extent of this problem, which is pretty big. My hon. Friend estimated that more than 250,000 vehicles were registered before 2001 and are still in use. Since that number includes many older vehicles, those are precisely the ones that are probably most prone to having safety problems. Of course, it is true that their numbers are falling year on year as they are scrapped and new lorries are introduced: the Road Haulage Association and the Department for Transport estimate that some 40,000 of these older lorries are disappearing year by year. Although there was no statutory requirement for manufacturers to fit seat belts in lorries registered prior to 2001, some manufacturers, such as Scania and Volvo, did so voluntarily because they were concerned about the safety implications if their cabs did not have them. So not every one of the 250,000 older lorries will be without seat belts, but many will. It is time to close that loophole.

I know from helpful conversations with Ministers and officials in the Department for Transport, and from helpful communication that I have had with the RHA, that there are no reliable data to allow us to judge just how many lorries there are currently on the road and in daily use that do not have seat belts appropriately fitted. But it is highly likely that their numbers run into many thousands—perhaps tens of thousands. DFT figures suggest that in 1997 alone more than 400,000 lorries in use had been registered prior to that date. Of course, I understand that the cabs of those old lorries may be difficult to adapt to enable a seat belt to be fitted, but that will not be so in all of them. Indeed, when my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town kindly agreed to meet the Williams family and myself in this place more than a year ago, he informed us that he had discovered that more than 150,000 HGVs registered before 2001 have the necessary anchorage points already fitted in their cabs to enable seat belts to be easily installed. So the fittings are there, but the seat belts are not. I can see no excuse for that, and I believe it has to change. I am not alone in that presumption.

In a letter to me dated 2 June last year, the chief executive of the RHA said that

"fitment of belts to those vehicles not currently fitted should not cause too much of an engineering problem."

The DFT estimates the cost of installation to be some £110 per vehicle. The RHA said that the cost could be between £200 and £300. I have every sympathy for road hauliers, particularly in the current difficult economic circumstances, who are finding it difficult sometimes to make ends meet. But this will not cost the earth. A few hundred pounds seems an incredibly small price to pay for something that is potentially life-saving. We know from the experience of the last few decades that seat belts save lives. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents estimates that in all vehicles—lorries, vans, cars, buses, etc.—over the last 25 years some 50,000 lives will have been saved as a result of people wearing seat belts.

In 1997 a report specifically looking at the consequences of fitting HGVs with seat belts indicated that some 130 deaths and serious injuries could be prevented if all truck drivers wore a seat belt. A further study conducted for the DFT in 2001, prior to the legislation being

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

introduced, concluded that three deaths and 35 serious injuries could be prevented if seat belts were fitted to HGVs.

Of course, even when seat belts are fitted they are not always worn. A decade ago, when the Government were thinking about introducing the legislation, it was estimated that only one in 10 truck drivers regularly wore a seat belt when fitted. That low level of usage remains a problem today, and I know that the Minister and his colleague are anxious to address the problem, and rightly so.

It is welcome that both the DFT and the organisations representing the road hauliers, most notably the RHA, are actively encouraging drivers to wear a seat belt when one is fitted. Sadly, Peter Williams did not have that option. If he had wanted to wear a seat belt, he could not have done so because his lorry was one of perhaps many thousands that did not have one installed. No one will ever know whether, if Peter's lorry had been fitted with a seat belt, he would still be with us, but I hope that most sensible people believe, as I do, that it is not unreasonable for lorry drivers, regardless of the age of the lorry that they are driving, to be afforded basic protection from death or serious injury in the event of an accident. We are all rightly concerned, here and in wider society, about drivers of cars and lorries not wearing seat belts when they are fitted.

I am no great fan of the nanny state approach to public policy, but when research consistently shows that one third of car occupants who received fatal injuries were not wearing seat belts, society, the Government and the law have a responsibility to act. Most people would agree with that. My question is a simple one: should we not extend our concerns from drivers not wearing their seat belts to vehicles that do not have seat belts fitted? Those are two sides of the same coin. They are both road safety issues, and they need to be addressed.

I know from conversations with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Paul Clark), that he is worried about the current loophole. My hon. Friend, like his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town, has taken an active interest in the Williams campaign, and I thank him for that. In essence, its plea is simple. It is urging haulage companies to fit seat belts to all commercial vehicles on the roads that do not have them. More than 10,000 people, many from my constituency, have already pledged support for the campaign, and they are not alone.

Mr. Andrew Tweddle, the Durham and Darlington coroner, who presided over the inquest into Peter's death, has called for the current law to be reviewed. When I approached the RHA, I was pleased to receive its support for a campaign that focuses on the operators of older vehicles that have anchorages fitted but no belts installed. Similarly, when I contacted the Health and Safety Executive, it offered to assist in disseminating messages about the fitting of safety belts in lorries.

Such a campaign is long overdue. I hope that today my right hon. Friend the Minister will pledge his Department's support for that campaign and, more than that, I hope that he will actively work with the various organisations representing road hauliers to make that campaign a priority for the new year. The aim should be to win the hearts and minds of the firms operating older lorries to fit seat belts to every single one of them. It is far better for the loophole in the current law to be addressed by voluntary action than by the sometimes arduous and often long process of legislative change. For one thing, that action, if the will exists to make it happen, can make progress quickly. Equally, however, if that campaign does not happen or does not succeed in persuading road hauliers to install seat belts, I hope that the Minister will at least keep open the option of amending the law to make such a change mandatory. I hope that common sense will prevail, and that we do not have to contemplate moving down the legislative route. More than that, however, I hope that common human decency will prevail.

Without seat belts, older lorries can become death traps for drivers who are unfortunate enough to be involved in an accident. We know that from what happened to Peter Williams. Nothing can bring Peter back, but I hope that lessons will be learned from his untimely death. My plea to my right hon. Friend the Minister is straightforward. Let us not wait for another preventable death before action is taken. Now is the time to take action, and I hope that he will pledge that he and his Department will take the lead in making that happen.

12.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr. Sadiq Khan): It is a pleasure to respond to an Adjournment debate with you in the Chair, Mr. Benton, and one introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn). I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate and providing an opportunity to discuss the fitting of seat belts into older heavy goods vehicles. He has already written to and been in regular contact with my Department, and met Ministers. He has done a lot to bring the issue to the fore, and let us be clear that, as he said, it was not at the fore for many MPs, my Department or the Government before his campaigning. I extend my condolences to my right hon. Friend's constituents, the Williams family, on the accident in July 2007, which had such tragic consequences for Peter and his family, who are doing a huge amount to raise this important issue and to ensure that no other family goes through the trauma that they suffered in 2007.

It may be helpful if I begin by summarising the current requirements for the fitting of seat belts in heavy goods vehicles on the road. They are set out in full in the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986, as amended. Regulation 47 is key to the context of today's debate. It states that every heavy goods vehicle first used on or after 1 October 2001, and having a maximum gross weight exceeding 3.5 tonnes, shall be fitted as respects the driver's seat belt with a three-point "lap and diagonal" belt or two-point lap belt, and as respects every other forward-facing front seat with a three-point "lap and diagonal" belt or two-point lap belt. Vehicles first registered between 1 October 1988 and October 2001 were required to be equipped with the mounting points for two-point lap belts only.

As my right hon. Friend stated, a costs and benefits study for my Department in 2001 indicated that 100 per cent. safety belt fitting across the fleet would save three lives and 35 serious injuries. Since then, the number of

HGV casualties has fallen steadily to 20 driver and three passenger fatalities in 2008, compared with 47 driver and seven passenger fatalities in 2001. That is still too many, but the casualties are fewer than originally estimated.

Our latest data from 2007 show that 527,740 large goods vehicles with a maximum gross weight exceeding 3.5 tonnes were licensed for use in Great Britain. Of those, 240,000 vehicles were first registered for use before October 2001, and my right hon. Friend made that point in his excellent speech. I have explained that those vehicles were not required by law to be fitted with three-point lap and diagonal seat belts, but some manufacturers install the anchorage devices to accept three-point belts. Some more safety-conscious manufacturers also provided the actual belts voluntarily, and we estimate that 105,000 vehicles may have been fitted with safety belts in this way, although, surprisingly, some may since have been removed. Around 25,000 vehicles—approximately 5 per cent. of the active fleet—were manufactured before October 1989 and are not suitable for any form of retrofit action.

The specific mounting points required in vehicles to install safety belts are usually incorporated at the time of manufacture. If the relevant anchorages are present in a vehicle's structure, we estimate that a safety belt could be fitted for less than £200. My right hon. Friend has explained in graphic terms the impact that a safety belt can have on the safety of a driver who is involved in an accident.

In some cases, safety belts are attached to anchorages on the seat, which are in turn mounted to reinforced points within the vehicle cab. Those seats are specially designed to withstand the large forces generated by a restrained occupant in an accident—otherwise, they would need to be replaced. For vehicles with suspension seats that are designed to reduce driver fatigue from vibrations, the retrospective installation of safety belts to the vehicle structure is an unlikely option due to comfort and ergonomic factors. In those instances, the entire seat would need to be replaced with one that used an integrated belt, at a cost in the region of £1,500 each. As my right hon. Friend will note, the issue is technically complex, and he is well versed in some of the issues involved.

Any campaign for the retrospective fitting of three-point lap and diagonal seat belts would need to target at least 110,000 vehicles. Such an action on those remaining vehicles could be completed during scheduled downtime, such as routine maintenance, thereby minimising any loss of income to the haulier. However, even if undertaken during downtime with no loss of income, such an action across the fleet would still cost between £25 million and £35 million, based on retail labour and material costs.

My Department has considered those costs in the context of the road casualty benefits, while also taking into account the economic situation, and in particular the burden that any new measures would place on companies in this important sector. In his important and considered speech, my right hon. Friend accepted that his preferred route would not be primary legislation. However, I am not complacent about the issue, and neither is the Department, which is actively working with trade associations to encourage haulage operators to fit safety belts into vehicles where the anchorage points are already installed. My officials have held two meetings with the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association, which between them represent about 75 per cent. of the active fleet. The Health and Safety Executive attended one of those meetings, and I am pleased to say that all present were supportive of the intent to encourage voluntary fitment of belts to those vehicles already engineered to accept them, and agreed to assist in the delivery of the message to their members, using existing networks.

It is mandatory to wear seat belts if they are fitted on heavy goods vehicles. However, it is difficult to get robust statistics on rates of seat belt wearing in heavy goods vehicles, because it is almost impossible to see whether the vehicle is fitted with a belt and, in some cases, it is difficult to tell whether a driver is using one. During our meeting, the trade associations also indicated that they would take the opportunity to encourage the greater use of seat belts, where fitted, among their members. If all goods vehicle drivers used their seat belts all of the time, lives would no doubt be saved. That wider message is not only for drivers of heavy goods vehicles but for drivers of other vehicles. I am pleased that both trade associations have engaged in publicity to promote the use of safety belts, and have produced reminder stickers that can be placed in vehicle cabs.

My right hon. Friend referred to the Freight Transport Association, and I am pleased to say that the FTA members magazine, *Freight*, included a supporting editorial that sought to remind employers of their responsibilities towards their employees, and further highlighted the issue among operators and drivers alike. The FTA has also updated its training DVD, and since January 2009 the daily checks that every driver should make as a routine part of their job now include the wearing of a seat belt where fitted.

My right hon. Friend referred to a speech made by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Jim Fitzpatrick) to the road safety charity Brake, at a conference on work-related safety issues earlier this year. The speech highlighted the fact that if seat belts were fitted to vehicles that were engineered to accept them, casualties could be reduced and lives could be saved. Additional publicity to highlight the issue of seat belt wearing among operators and drivers could usefully raise the profile of the problem, and we will continue to work with the industry to ensure that any opportunities are fully exploited.

Mr. Milburn: On that point, I fully understand and welcome the fact that the various associations are campaigning and giving a profile to the issue, so as to encourage more truck drivers to wear belts when they are fitted. I want to ask the Minister two simple and specific things. First, alongside that campaign, may we have a small, specific campaign run by the Department for Transport, the two associations, the HSE and anybody else who wants to get involved? It should be given a reasonable profile, so that we can see that it is happening.

Secondly, may we try to get an arrangement with the Road Haulage Association, and through it the fleet operators that it represents, to ascertain the impact of such a campaign? It would be good to be able to come back at the end of 2010—alas, I will not be here, but no doubt someone in my place will be taking up the cudgel—and ascertain what impact such a campaign has had, and how many additional older lorries that currently do not have seat belts have been fitted with them.

Mr. Khan: I welcome that intervention, and I will respond with a couple of points. First, I am happy to look at the issue of a specific and discrete piece of work that the HSE could do on this specific and discrete problem. Secondly, of course we need to measure success on an objective basis, to see whether there has been an impact on this working relationship. In his speech, my right hon. Friend made a plea for us to keep all matters under review, and I am pleased to do that.

I conclude by saying that this is not an issue that fills the postbags of MPs. The fact that my right hon. Friend has taken up the cause means that it is higher up the DFT's radar than would otherwise be the case. I hope that he will go back to the Williams family and not only pass on my condolences but say that we have heard the message about the importance of this issue. We will continue to work with key stakeholders, road safety charities, the industry and haulage companies, drivers, the Health and Safety Executive, and with my right hon. Friend, whether he is inside or outside the House. He has been a passionate advocate for this important cause, and we must see what progress can be made. If it is not made fast enough, we must see whether we can make it even faster. I thank my right hon. Friend once again for raising this issue in what has been an important Adjournment debate.

Immigration Policy (Language Schools)

12.57 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Benton. This important topic is causing great concern among the hard-working people in language schools up and down the country. First, I will say something about how important these schools are, and then I will do a little geographical tour to show how important English language schools and centres are to certain areas. At that point, hon. Members might like to make brief interventions, and then we can perhaps touch on immigration policy.

There are 600,000 foreign students who are in the UK to learn English, and over 400,000 are in the 435 centres of English UK. That generates £1.5 billion of foreign earnings for the UK economy. Better than that, there is great potential for growth. We are still leaders in the area; there is stiff competition from Australia and many other places, but it is an area which, over recent years, has shown and can potentially show growth. Given our nation's current economic circumstances and the value of the pound, it is an area which, if nurtured and encouraged, could generate significantly more jobs.

Many of these businesses are family businesses. In my constituency, we have the Wessex Academy, which has been going for 38 years. It was founded by the father of Andrew Doran, who is the current principal. Like many other businesses, a lot of blood, sweat, toil and tears—to use the phrase of a former great Prime Minister—has gone into building up these businesses, and a lot of hard work has been undertaken to encourage students in a competitive international market.

Language schools are very important because, according to the recent survey, 52 per cent. of their students either go on to study for professional qualifications or go to UK universities. That provides a major income for our universities. In our universities in 2007-08, 229,640 students were from outside the EU, generating a fee income of £1.87 billion—about 8 per cent. of the income for UK universities. That is a very important factor.

More importantly for the language schools—apart from the fee income—many of the students stay with local families. We know the tax break of £4,800 that families can get. Many families in my constituency not only have students staying with them but had the parents of those students staying with them 20 years ago when they came to the UK to learn English. That is of major importance to many of the centres where there are English language schools, which are fairly geographically defined. Many hon. Members in this Chamber represent areas where there are many language schools.

The income is significant. The local tourism people in Poole estimate that for every £1 million-worth of foreign exchange earned by the language schools, 22 local jobs are created. We have had many debates on the difficulties of coastal towns, where language schools tend to be prevalent. One industry that those towns can grow and create jobs with is language schools. Therefore, anything that the Government do that makes their position more difficult will cause problems, especially for the more geographically isolated. At this point, I shall give way to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (David Lepper), who is chairman of the all-party group on English language teaching.

David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this brief but important debate. Brighton and Hove has the full range, from English language schools to two universities, for which foreign students—overseas students—are essential. Has the hon. Gentleman, like me, had an opportunity to read the excellent submission to the review, prepared by English UK, which not only sets out the dangers to the education system in this country of the changes proposed, but offers alternative ways of dealing with suspected visa abuse?

Mr. Syms: I did look at that submission; I would draw it to the Minister's attention. We do not have time to go into the detail of it today, but it was very constructive and made alternative suggestions about how we can deal with the abuse of the system. I know how important education in all its forms is to the Greater Brighton area, and that many other hon. Members, who represent areas not too far from Brighton, take an interest in such matters.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that at the heart of this debate lies the problem that exists in his constituency and mine and all over the country, which is that this excellent part of our education system will be dragged into disrepute by the large number of over-stayers who will be able to come and abuse it?

Mr. Syms: We all want firm and fair immigration policies and we have to deal with abuses. We should not do so in a way that causes problems for legitimate businesses, jobs and the income that is generated.

Mr. Andrew Smith (Oxford, East) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman on securing this enormously important debate, and I endorse the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (David Lepper). Is there not a real danger that a signal will go round the world that somehow these students are not welcome here? That would be disastrous. This issue is enormously important not only to coastal towns but to Oxford, which has a number of high-quality language schools. As the hon. Gentleman said, they are a very important source of income for the host families as well.

Mr. Syms: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Of course, Oxford is one of the major centres. We must bear in mind those competing with English language schools. At the moment, many agents are not sure what to do. They are dealing with students who may come in March, the summer or the autumn, but are not sure whether they should send them to the UK or elsewhere. Therefore, even the process of having a review can cause difficulties. The right hon. Gentleman has a long history of taking an interest in this matter and particularly of considering regulation and accreditation of language schools.

The Bournemouth and Poole area is very important for language schools, and it would be wrong of me not to allow my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Sir John Butterfill), to intervene.

Sir John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West) (Con): My hon. Friend will know very well that the Bournemouth and Poole conurbation produces some £200 million for our local economy. The real problem is that the changes come in so quickly. The previous change was only seven months ago. That alone has cost the Bournemouth business school, for example, £315,000 in the past year. If that was carried on, the revenue loss for that college alone would be more than £2.9 million. Such losses are unsustainable. Unless something is done, thoroughly reputable large language schools in our constituencies and elsewhere will go to the wall.

Mr. Syms: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, which is very close to our constituents.

London, of course, has language schools, but not such a concentration; they are a bit more diffuse. I talked about the matter to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) the other day, and I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) is in his place.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. My hon. Friend is right. The schools in London may be more diffuse, but in pockets of London, such as Wimbledon, there is a thriving language school sector. The point that he makes about the local economy of Poole is also true in Wimbledon, particularly in relation to the large number of host families. Some 60 or 70 host families have written to me about the economic change that would take place for them and the school.

Does my hon. Friend agree that at the heart of this there are two problems for the Government? First, they are using a very small number of circumstances to make a wider point, which is wrong for the formulation of policy. Secondly, if we consider what many of the language schools do, which is to teach the English language to beginners, we see that the hurdle being set is the wrong one.

Mr. Syms: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I talked a moment ago about areas that are slightly isolated geographically, and I would include Torquay and Torbay, where my parents had their honeymoon.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): Perhaps I can enter this cross-party consensus. I cannot over-emphasise to the Minister the vital trickle-down effect of the money that goes into the household budgets of host families. That is particularly important in low-wage areas such as mine.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. I hope that the Minister now appreciates how important this industry is for our constituents and for those who benefit from the courses.

To move on to immigration policy, seven months ago we had major changes. They were always going to be phased in. We know that there are some problems—clearly, the Government's migration adviser has made a number of points about that—and we know that there are some loopholes, which particularly relate to south China. What people do not understand is why suddenly we have this very quick review, taking four or five weeks to

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get the information in, and with possible decisions being made very quickly, when all the parts of the changes seven months ago have not yet been introduced in the system. I also understand that in February next year the IT system kicks in. People are a little perplexed that this has come out of the blue, and they are worried about where the Government are going with this policy.

The matter on which the Government are consulting would have dire implications for many of the schools. As many as 50,000 students could end up not being able to come to the UK, resulting in a loss of hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of foreign exchange and in those people not feeding through to the university sector. If we stop people coming in for technical education, that will have an impact on technical colleges. Taking the wrong decisions at this point would have many consequences—for language schools, for foreign exchange and for jobs. When the Minister winds up the debate, will he confirm whether the IT system is still on track to be introduced in February?

Things can be done. We can tighten up immigration policy without having a blanket change that affects every single language school. I have had the following points made to me. If there is a problem with certain countries, why not seek a solution on a country-by-country basis, rather than on a blanket basis? If there is a problem with the practice by individual education centres, why not address it centre by centre, rather than on a blanket basis? Why not introduce greater controls in terms of the proof of funds that student visa applicants must show? Why not introduce the payment of fees in advance? As we know, people have fiddled their bank statements to show that they have significantly more money than they actually have. Allowing people to provide a deposit or some money towards courses—certainly towards non-degree courses—would be one way around the problem. We could also introduce independent testing of students' English language competence when they apply for their UK student visa.

I cannot emphasise more that introducing a blanket measure could have a dire effect on businesses.

Sir John Butterfill: Let me just support what my hon. Friend is saying. In Bournemouth, the British Study Centres Group, which turns over £4.2 million, has a high proportion of students from Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia. Students from those countries are not likely to overstay or to make false applications. What we are talking about is a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Mr. Syms: Absolutely. I agree with my hon. Friend.

Even the measure to restrict the work that students can do, which the Government are consulting on, could have a big impact. If we introduced such a measure, only wealthy students would be able to come to the UK. Many students come here from, for example, Kazakhstan and Colombia because they need English and want to improve themselves. They do not have the benefit of massive state funds, so they are motivated to take a local job. Reducing working from 20 hours to 10 hours or fewer would therefore be detrimental and a great problem. Indeed, Tony Blair was one of the individuals who promoted the current arrangements to allow some poorer students back into the UK. Many of the things that are being consulted on will therefore cause a problem for schools.

Not allowing in people for pre-university courses will also have geopolitical ramifications. More than 15,000 of the students who come here for pre-university foundation courses in English are funded by the King Abdullah scholarship programme in Saudi Arabia. If we start introducing blanket proposals, there may be diplomatic consequences for some of our friends around the world, who want their students to come here to benefit from a good education and to help sustain good relations with the United Kingdom.

I do not have time to do the subject justice. I am pleased that the Minister has agreed to meet 12, 13 or 14 MPs and representatives of language schools tomorrow afternoon so that we can continue this conversation. However, I urge him not to pursue blanket policies, to be specific where there are problems and, most importantly, to get the review team to work with the education sector and its representative bodies to find alternative proposals that promote firm and fair immigration control, which we are all in favour of, without causing widespread, indiscriminate damage. That is the great risk in what we are discussing today. I look forward to what the Minister has to say.

1.13 pm

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): Once again, it is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr. Benton, as one of the most senior Chairmen—if not the most senior Chairman—in our House.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) for securing this timely debate, which gives me an opportunity to calm some nerves. At 3 pm tomorrow, in Committee Room 13, we will be having the meeting that he requested of me for hon. Members who are interested in this subject. That is important. I have never refused a request for a meeting with a Member of Parliament and I hope I never do.

Let me give hon. Members a personal reassurance about what I intend. I examined language colleges in Bournemouth and Poole in 1987, when I made a documentary on behalf of unregulated students. Aside from winning an award for my production team, I learned two things: first, regulation of the sector was desired by genuine colleges because some students were being exploited; and secondly, the sector's importance to the UK economy is significant. It is, or was at that time, the UK's seventh-largest export in economic terms—indeed, it was more important than textiles to the balance of payments, and I suspect that it is even more important now.

The hon. Gentleman's local authority and the authority in Bournemouth pursued a deliberate strategy of introducing language students to bring younger people into the constituencies, which were described in the national press at the time as being the oldest in the country. I always thought that there would be advantages in that regard to being the local Member of Parliament. I can therefore give the hon. Gentleman a personal assurance that I understand deeply the importance of the issue.

Let me explain what the Government are doing and provide some reassurance. The hon. Gentleman asked some important questions, one of which was why we

are conducting a review so early. We introduced tier 4 in March to give the sector advance notice for the freshers intake in the autumn. I may need to do some tweaking and I want to be able to do that in good time for the new applications next year. That is why the review is to be short and quick. As the hon. Gentleman accepts, we are playing a cat-and-mouse game, and my responsibility is immigration control.

The hon. Gentleman seeks a reassurance that the review understands the sector's importance, and I can give him that. The review is being undertaken with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the further and higher education sector and the UK Border Agency. We needed to make the review short and sharp to try to address the issues.

The most important thing that I want to say is that we are not talking about proposals. Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (David Lepper), suggested that there were proposals, but we are talking about a consultation—an open-minded consultation. I am trying to refine the immigration system for students so that it protects the sector and provides for strong and robust immigration controls.

David Lepper: I take the Minister's point that these matters are out for consultation. Unfortunately, the speed with which the review was announced and the lack of any background information accompanying that announcement have sent shockwaves through the sector. Many people, including the well over 100 representatives of host families in my constituency, are convinced that these are proposals. Greater thought should have been given to the way in which the review was presented.

Mr. Woolas: I take my hon. Friend's point. However, the review needed to be short and sharp. We needed to balance the need for proper consultation with people who know what they are talking about with the precise need not to damage the sector. I have described this as a cat-and-mouse game, and I will give some examples of why we had to take the approach that we have taken.

The introduction of the points-based system with the sponsor-licensing system resulted in the closure of about 2,000 organisations that were clearly not providing decent and proper education and that were exploiting students, who had often paid for non-courses. Crucially—I ask hon. Members to take this point on board—the best way in which we can protect the reputation of decent providers of education to foreign students is by removing the non-decent providers. I need to do that if we are to ensure that the system is robust and that our qualifications are the best in the world, as I believe they are. That is difficult, but my purpose is immigration control, not the diminution of the sector, and I hope that that provides some reassurance. As I said, we have flushed out 2,000 organisations.

Let me reassure hon. Members about the Government's understanding of the importance of the sector. The British Council estimates that overseas students' fees directly and indirectly benefit this country by £8.5 billion. The use of the English language as the predominant language of business and commerce around the world is in my view one of this country's greatest assets, other than its people. It is important that we understand that: it is why protecting the reputation of the colleges is so important. Of course we understand that the technical standards, language, culture and understanding in the different sectors benefit this small trading nation immeasurably, over and above that £8.5 billion.

We believe that the new sponsorship system, in which responsibility is put on the organisation—the college providing the service—better enables us to manage migration in the sector. I also want to reassure hon. Members that, since the introduction of the points-based system, the number of overseas students coming to Britain has gone up, not down, despite the worries of the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs, which has raised some points.

Mr. Soames: On that point, did the Minister hear on the BBC the other day the senior immigration officer who said:

"We have an awful lot of students who have been refused five, six, even up to nine visas to come here to this country, whether it be for working holidays or student applications, and they're now coming here"?

Is not it true that, with the best will in the world, the points-based system is not working in this case?

Mr. Woolas: The hon. Gentleman, who knows a lot about the subject, makes an important point from the point of view of controlling migration. If I may make a partisan point, it is that a cap on immigration, were it to include tier 4 and short-term student visitors, would decimate the sector, and higher education as well. I have not heard from the Opposition Front Bench team, whose members are not here, whether the cap should apply to students. I should be interested in the answer to that question, because if the cap does not apply, it renders the policy meaningless in terms of reducing net migration, bearing in mind that immigration is defined independently by the Office for National Statistics on the basis of people who come to the country for 12 months or more. That includes significant numbers of overseas students. Thus, the policy of the Opposition is not commensurate with the intention of the hon. Member for Poole. I made my partisan point not to buy time but to make a political point, which no doubt we shall hear more about over the next few months.

To return to the important policy area that we are discussing, the system has resulted in a cat-and-mouse game. We experienced significant increases in the number of applications for student visas from four countries—Bangladesh, China, India and Nepal. The hon. Member for Poole made a strong point about whether we could take a country-by-country rather than blanket approach. We have acted to close down applications in those cases, particularly in the case of an office in south China. I suspended applications there because clearly something untoward was happening.

I needed the review to produce the changes—if there are to be any—to make the system more robust. I want the action to be short and sharp to deal with exactly the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) made. It is only right that we should do that. The hon. Member for Poole asked whether we could proceed centre by centre. The sponsoring system allows us to that, and the message that he and other hon. Members of all parties should take back to their constituents is that we want to protect the reputation of

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the proper institutions, and the team that we have from the two relevant Departments understands that.

It is important to consider the questions in the review. It asks—it does not make a proposal—whether we should raise the bar on the minimum level of study; and whether we should consider the point that the hon. Member for Poole made about English language and how we test it. The United Kingdom Border Agency makes English language requirements in visa applications in many cases. It is a policy that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex and others have supported. We pay particular attention to the accreditation and we are grateful to Cambridge ESOL and the International English Language Testing System for their work. We look at the relationship between vocational study and work, because the question of access to working rights for students—both part-time work and work through vocational courses—relates directly to abuses or intended abuses of the immigration system, and we need protection in that context as well.

We need also to think about dependants' rights. In some posts there has been a significant increase in the number of applications for entry visas for dependants of students, which again suggests using the policy advocated by the hon. Member for Poole of a country-by-country and centre-by-centre approach. However, do we need to do anything in the rules for tier 4 at the higher education and further education levels? Those are the questions that we have been asking.

I believe that the introduction of tier 4 has been a success. The hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) asked about that. I remind him that before, in the old system, there was very little objectivity. There were subjective decisions, which resulted in significant numbers of appeals, and of course there was no check on the intention of the student and whether the student visa application was intended not for study but for entry into the United Kingdom with a view to a permanent stay. It is the breaking of the link between temporary admission and the automatic right to permanent settlement that is at the core of our immigration policy. I know that the hon. Gentleman supports that.

The challenge that the House faces is how to carry that policy out without damaging—indeed, while protecting—the reputation of our language sector and further and higher education sectors. I reassure hon. Members that the consultation questions are questions, not proposals. That is why we have gone about things in a short sharp way. We thought that that was right. My right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East made a valid point about whether the review itself would damage the reputation of the sector. I hope not—it is not intended to do so. That is why it is happening now, before Christmas, and why it is being done quickly. It is also why I am keen to listen to the views of hon. Members, who have the interests of their constituents and the United Kingdom at heart. There is a cross-party view on the matter, which relates broadly to the south coast of England, but is not exclusive to it. My experience is that it would be foolish of any Government to ignore the south coast of England.

Mr. Smith: And Oxford.

Mr. Woolas: I indicated that there are exceptions, although I wonder whether I needed to be reminded of the importance of Oxford. I wish that all the organisations that applied for a sponsor licence and that had the word "Oxford" in their names were actually in Oxford. Perhaps my right hon. Friend could get intellectual property rights to the name. He would be well served by doing that.

I think that I have answered all the questions that the hon. Member for Poole raised and I have tried to explain the approach that we are taking. Perhaps I may abuse my position by re-advertising tomorrow's meeting. Many people in this important sector will listen to the debate, and I want to reassure them that our intention is robust immigration control, which we believe will be to the benefit of the sector's reputation. We are also keen to make any changes that are needed to protect that immigration policy in a way that is commensurate with the protection and promotion of that valuable sector.

Sir John Butterfill: Will the Minister confirm the venue of the meeting? Is it Room W4? I thought I heard him say something else.

Mr. Woolas: It is in Committee Room 13—a number that I hope is not significant.

I could have gone into more detail, but I suspect that right hon. and hon. Members wanted to know the Government's intentions. I hope that I have provided an explanation of those intentions. There are some difficult questions, including about the interface between the further and higher education sectors and about temporary and permanent residence.

Finally, a useful piece of information is that tier 4 does not cover short-term student visitors coming for six months or less. Many of the institutions that the hon. Member for Poole is concerned about are in that sector and are not affected.

Purton Hulks

1.30 pm

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): The next debate is on the future of the Purton hulks.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted, Mr. Benton, that you have already given some publicity to my Adjournment debate; I shall say more about the Purton hulks over the next quarter of an hour. I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend the Minister in her place. Not only will she be responding to the debate, but she has been to Purton and seen for herself a wonderful bit of potential archaeology—something that is witness to the history of our nation.

Although the Minister has visited the area, I should explain that the hulks are beached vessels, barges and trows, that date from 1919 to 1965. They were drawn up on the banks of the River Severn. Some say, rather stupidly perhaps, that to some extent we have preserved the vessels, but they were put there to protect the river banks and have been there ever since. That would be of interest in itself, but I raise the subject today because although the weather and the river have taken their toll, human beings too have taken a toll.

If nothing else, I do not need to disabuse my right hon. Friend about the Purton hulks. Some might think that they are some form of Gloucestershire manhood. I repeat the ditty that we sing on the terraces, "We can't read and we can't write, but it don't really matter 'cause we come from Glos-shire and we can drive a tratter." I do not need to say anything more, except that we are here not to drive tractors but to try to protect this wonderful site. We want to do whatever we can.

To be fair, I have received almost a deluge of paperwork and many phone calls over the past couple of days, which shows that there is interest and commitment. The reason for calling today's debate is to give the matter some urgency and some oomph. We seek a solution to what is a tricky problem. Sadly, we might have had a proper debate if the Heritage Protection Bill had not been put on hold, because it included a section on protecting the marine environment. It was not included in the Queen's Speech but is sitting on someone's table, and I hope that it will be resurrected because, although we are debating the Purton hulks today, the problem arises in other marine sites; they too need protection.

I start by paying due regard to those who proselytised me to take up the matter. I think of the group led by Paul Barnett, who chairs the Friends of Purton and many others, including Professor Mark Horton of Bristol university. They have helped us to understand that we ought to do something about this little bit of our history. We are not asking for the hulks to be repaired or to be floated away; we are just asking for them to be kept in as good a state as possible and for humankind to stop damaging them.

There are 81 vessels tied up alongside the Severn, and they have been there since 1919. Some of the vessels are unique; they are the last of their type. That in itself is a good reason for trying to keep them for people to see. Until I was sent the itinerary, I could not believe how popular the site has become for visitors. Virtually every weekend, groups are looking at what, when I was younger, was simply something on the shore line. We did not understand what it was; it looked rather like a collection of boats, but one could not make sense of it.

Now, however, the boats are all labelled, and thanks to British Waterways a monument has been constructed. I congratulate those who have made it such a unique experience. It certainly seems unique when one hears Paul Barnett talking about the hulks for several hours; he is most enthusiastic about them. I know that some find him somewhat difficult because he has driven things forward as a personal campaign, but with hindsight people will say, "Thank goodness he saw it as a vision and as his responsibility."

What am I asking for? In reality, two simple things. First, I would like the Minister to organise a round table to bring together the various parties. I would like to be there, and although I do not expect the Minister to attend, she may care to drop in. At the meeting, we could establish where we are at. There have been misunderstandings and, dare I say, a degree of distrust as a result of the belief that something would be done and promises that people thought had been made but were not kept. It is time that we cleared the air.

Secondly, I am pleased that as a result of today's debate we now have an interim statement of significance—is it a coincidence that it arrived in time for the debate?—but I would like to know when the final version will be available and what it will say. At least we now have some documentation. Alongside that, I was sent last month's scheduled monuments paper by the Department for Communities and Local Government. I am not sure that I understand it all—as the Minister knows, I am a poor country boy—but it suggests ways in which we can consider some form of protection without legislation. I hope that my right hon. Friend will have something to say about that.

Those 81 vessels are there for the reasons that I have given, and nature will take its toll, but we want to stop human beings taking their toll—wantonly damaging the site and setting fire to it. Even trophy hunters have been taking quite valuable artefacts. Some artefacts may be best in other places, but some are best left in situ; that is what makes the hulks, the beached boats, what they are.

I know that a lot of work has gone on. The Department has been working with English Heritage, the Friends of Purton Hulks, Bristol university and Mark Horton, Cotswold Archaeology, Stroud district council, Gloucestershire county council, National Historic Ships—formerly the Advisory Committee on National Historic Ships—and the Advisory Committee on Historic Wreck Sites. If we get them all around the table, we will need a big table, but that may be the way forward. There is also English Heritage. The area is a site of special scientific interest and is the responsibility of Natural England, but does that body have the ability to protect the human environment? We can protect the natural environment, but the hulks have become part of the natural environment despite being entirely man-made. It would be interesting to know whether SSSIs fit its remit.

I shall go through the interim statement of significance. The hulks have four heritage values—English Heritage's definition of how to measure the site—which are evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal. It would be great if that referred to all marine sites of importance, but how does it relate to Purton, and what protections does it give the area?

[Mr. David Drew]

In particular, the question is whether there is a statutory duty on the various bodies, such as Natural England and English Heritage, to protect it. We know that we cannot have the site policed morning, noon and night, but it is not as simple as that. However, although theft has been reported to the police, they say that it is impossible to do anything because the site has no specific protection. That is galling for those who have spent their lives trying to protect it. The Minister told me in a parliamentary answer that perhaps we should consider asking the local authority to CPO it. To be fair, I have asked the police about using crime prevention officers, but they say that it would be difficult and might not be appropriate on such a site. None the less, that is one matter that could be discussed around the table. We would also need to include British Waterways—as my right hon. Friend knows only too well, the hulks are next to the Gloucestershire to Sharpness canal—and the Berkeley estate, the landowners; both would have a view on whether it should be CPO-ed. I imagine that neither would object to that, but there would be questions about value, access and who should take responsibility.

I welcome the interim statement of significance as a move in the right direction. However, it has been criticised by the Friends of Purton, which is why, if we want to move things on, we need a round robin discussion. The four heritage value statements in the document include tangible reasons why the site should receive better protection, which would help us to take it forward for future generations. As I have already said, the boats are unique, and we want to keep them for as long as we possibly can.

I have only one other point to make before I hand over to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who, I am sure, will have some interesting things to say about the site. The existing mechanism that enables the friends and other interested parties to give their time and effort to the site is one of the ways in which we could take the matter forward. If we give such people some status—I do not necessarily mean that they will be policemen and women—they will know that they have the power of protection. They will be working with English Heritage, which is very important, and the Department. However, I do not want to underestimate or deny the influence of those volunteers who have been so important in getting the matter to this stage.

It is sad for me and the Minister that we are not taking the Heritage Protection Bill through the House. I am sure that it would have been a consensual Bill. I would have been interested to find out where Purton fitted within the wider marine environmental concerns that the Bill would have addressed. I have already talked about the issue of the SSSIs, but more particularly, will we be more serious about protecting the marine environment? The people who have talked to me, passionate though they are about Purton, raise all manner of questions about other sites, which are less well known and sometimes in an even poorer state in terms of the type of material that is left as evidence of their former selves. They are, nevertheless, important.

Although I am no expert—I am fast becoming one—I have been told that the subject is one of growing interest, both historically and archeologically. Quite rightly, we protect buildings of all manners because we think that they are really important to our heritage. Yet our maritime environment seems to be subjected far more not to the depredations of nature but to the wilfulness of human beings, which is very sad. Perhaps if people knew what they were doing, they would not do it, and let us hope that if we get some protection on the site, they will stop doing it. I hope that explaining to people and educating them is a good way forward. That is why to get people round the table would at least be a helpful way forward.

1.43 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Margaret Hodge): It is a pleasure to sit under your chairmanship, Mr. Benton. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on securing this debate. He is assiduous in working on behalf of his constituents. I have had innumerable debates on issues that he has raised in this Chamber. He is an excellent constituency MP.

Let me say something general about heritage and scheduled monuments and then come to the issues around Purton. We have a proud record in the UK on the policy and practice of heritage protection. We have had legislation in place to protect all our ancient monuments since the 1880s. This Government have a proud record of investing in heritage and developing policies around heritage.

More than 19,000 sites are legally protected through designation, and they are called "scheduled monuments". They represent our most valued archaeological sites and landscapes, and they are designated because they are of national importance. They include a whole range of lovely things, such as burial mounds, stone circles and hill forts, Roman towns, villas, medieval settlements, castles and abbeys. They also include the structures of our more recent industrial and military past. They are a unique inheritance that tells the story of many generations of human endeavour, and provide the only record of millennia for which we have no written history.

In compiling the schedule, our aim is not just to preserve everything of interest— clearly that would not be practicable—but to ensure that a representative sample of England's most important assets are protected and conserved for the benefit of current and future generations.

Scheduling a site is a three-step process. First, we must ensure that it complies with the definition of a "monument" under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Secondly, we must ensure that it complies with our non-statutory criteria for determining "national importance", which are published in planning policy guidance note 16. Finally, we must ensure that scheduling represents the most appropriate management option for long-term protection and conservation.

If there is a site that does not meet scheduled monument status, we have the Government draft planning policy statement for the historic environment, which we are just putting together and hope to publish shortly. In my trip to Purton—I thank my hon. Friend for buying me a pair of Wellington boots to ensure that I did not ruin my high heels—I was very well looked after by the Friends of Purton. I know that the work of local communities and voluntary groups is important to ensure that our heritage assets are valued and cared for. Heritage assets are strong in creating a sense of identity in the community, and in bringing a community together.

When there are monuments or other heritage assets that are at risk, English Heritage intervenes. It has a register that includes all our scheduled monuments. Some 18 per cent. of scheduled monuments that are currently considered to be at risk are monuments, compared with only 3.5 per cent. of buildings. Therefore, that indicates that even if something is scheduled, there is difficulty in ensuring that it is conserved properly and protected for this and future generations.

Scheduled monuments are vulnerable not just to development, which we will come back to, but to the pressures of nature, whether totally natural forces such as erosion, which faces us in Purton, or agricultural intensification, forestry and other factors. It is those pressures that pose the greatest threat to lots of scheduled monuments, and that brings us to Purton hulks.

If we were to schedule Purton hulks, it would oblige the owner of the site, the Berkeley estate, to apply for consent if it wanted to change something. It would not put any legal obligations on the owner to do anything with regard to conservation. So, it stops the owner from doing things, rather than positively making the owner act in a way to conserve the hulks for future generations.

Vandalism is one of the problems facing the hulks. If the hulks were scheduled, theoretically English Heritage could then prosecute those responsible for the vandalism, because it is a criminal offence. However, as my hon. Friend knows, it is a terribly isolated site, and the idea that anyone could catch the villains who either took a trophy from it or deliberately damaged it is remote. So I am not sure that scheduling would provide the sort of protection that my hon. Friend and the Friends of Purton seek.

Erosion is a similar problem, and an important one in that particular area, but there is no legal obligation on the owner of the land or on English Heritage, if Purton were to become a scheduled monument, to do anything about it.

There are many agencies that could take an interest in the Purton hulks. Perhaps my hon. Friend and the Friends of Purton, as an active group, could persuade those agencies to take action. Obviously one thinks of the Environment Agency, Natural England and English Heritage, and if those agencies worked together they might do something. However, there is not a legal obligation on anybody to do anything. So scheduling would not be the silver bullet that some members of the Friends of Purton group believe it to be.

Finally, I want to say that English Heritage is doing a lot. It has published the interim statement of significance that I referred to and it has also published an aerial photographic review of Purton, which is part of the Severn estuary rapid coastal zone assessment survey; I think that that survey will be published in June 2010. In January, it will commission a strategic thematic review of hulks around the country, to establish the value of those hulks in general and the specific value of the Purton hulks. It is preparing a conservation statement and management plan for the assemblage at Purton. Also, a report that will assess boats and ships will be published in June 2010, which will determine the special interest of surviving hulked vessels. So there is quite a lot going on.

I am just trying to see what the time is.

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): There is something wrong with the clocks. You have about nine minutes left.

Margaret Hodge: Then I can go back and discuss all that in a bit more detail. I panicked and thought, "My goodness, I've got three minutes left".

So, as I said, English Heritage is doing quite a lot. Now that I have realised that I have slightly more time than I had thought, I can say that by June 2010 English Heritage, according to its current timetable, will be able to assess the vessels at Purton as part of the nationwide assessment that it is making of the vessels that are scattered right across the coast and probably in other estuaries around the UK. By July 2010, it will issue the first draft of a conservation statement and management plan, which will enable the assessment of the national importance of the assemblage at Purton to be undertaken. So, as I say, English Heritage believes that by July 2010 it will have done something about Purton.

My hon. Friend referred to the letter that I sent to him. I say to him that his local authority can and should seriously consider taking action to compulsorily purchase the site at Purton. I know that he said that the local authority has no interest in doing so. However, if there is local concern about conserving and preserving those hulks, it is for the local authority in that instance to consider whether the use of a compulsory purchase order would be appropriate. Frankly, if one thinks about the problem of vandalism at the site it seems to me that the local authority, rather than a Government agency, taking responsibility for dealing with that problem would be a good way forward.

Mr. Drew: That is a very good reason for getting us all around a table, so that we can at least address issues such as vandalism, find out why there may be some reluctance on the part of the local authority to deal with them and see how English Heritage, the Minister's Department and Natural England might be able to help it to deal with them.

Margaret Hodge: I will come to that issue shortly. I think that I will finish soon and, knowing my hon. Friend, I am sure that he will take up the last two minutes of the time allotted for this debate.

I will undertake to do two things. First, I have asked my officials to consider whether we should schedule this particular site in advance of the other actions that are being taken in relation to the site. So there will be consideration of that issue and I hope to come back to him within about two or three months with more details, if he can give me that time. However, he must recognise that scheduling is not the silver bullet answer that he wants.

Secondly, after we have taken a view on whether to schedule the Purton site, I will undertake to convene the round-table discussion that my hon. Friend has sought today. I hope that that discussion can happen in March or April—in that sort of time frame.

Mr. Drew: In March, rather than April, I hope.

Margaret Hodge: March, rather than April. I hope that, by the end of March, we will be able to convene that round-table discussion.

[Margaret Hodge]

Finally, I want to say something about the Friends of Purton group. It is doing a fantastic job. Having seen the commitment, enthusiasm and determination of members of what is a very small community in a very lovely part of my hon. Friend's constituency as they work together to conserve hulks that excited me when I saw them—I thought that they were really something and that we ought to do our best to achieve a good solution for them, despite all the difficulties that we face—I want to say that their efforts need to be commended in this House. I hope that my hon. Friend and I, working in co-operation, can find some solution to the problem of the Purton hulks before the end of this Parliament.

Mr. Drew: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

1.56 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 December 2009

[MR. MIKE HANCOCK *in the Chair*]

Burma

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr. Blizzard.)*

9.30 am

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hancock.

It is highly appropriate that we are considering the human rights crisis in Burma just one day before we mark the anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights and celebrate international human rights day. Burma is ruled by one of the world's most brutal regimes, which is guilty of every possible violation of human rights. The military regime, known as the State Peace and Development Council, has cruelly suppressed democracy and is perpetrating war crimes and crimes against humanity against many of its people.

The Nobel laureate and democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, led her party, the National League for Democracy, to a remarkable and overwhelming victory in elections held in 1990. Despite the party winning 82 per cent. of the parliamentary seats, 19 years on, most of those who were elected are in jail or in exile. The junta rejected the results, imprisoned the victors and has intensified its grip on power. Aung San Suu Kyi has spent over 14 years under house arrest.

In May this year, her term expired and even under Burmese law, she should have been released. However, the regime found an excuse to keep her under house arrest after an American, John Yettaw, swam across the lake to her home. He went there uninvited, she asked him to leave and he refused. Despite that, she was taken to Insein prison and charged with breaking the terms of her house arrest. A sham trial followed and she was sentenced on 11 August to a further 18 months of house arrest.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He is right that the charges were trumped up. Does he agree that if it had not been for the American journalist swimming across the lake, the regime would have found other charges to ensure that Aung San Suu Kyi remained in prison for much longer?

Mr. Evans: If it was not for that incident, there would have been something else. The one thing that the junta does not want is to see Aung San Suu Kyi released and for her to be free among her own people who want to see her lead the country.

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Burmese regime was in any way serious about political engagement with the United States or its Asian neighbours, it would take the important first step of releasing the political prisoners, Aung San Suu Kyi in particular?

Mr. Evans: That is one of the things we want to see. That has to happen before people will take the junta seriously. It is not just Aung San Suu Kyi. As my hon. Friend rightly said, a number of other political prisoners are being detained as we speak.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this odious regime is using the mental health system to remove and illegally detain politically active monks who are seeking justice and fairness for the people and for the regime's political opponents?

Mr. Evans: Absolutely. I will refer to that later.

Despite being detained, Aung San Suu Kyi has courageously and consistently called for dialogue with her captors. On 20 May this year, from inside Insein prison, she said:

"It is still not too late to achieve national reconciliation."

In September, she wrote to the head of the regime, Senior General Than Shwe, proposing dialogue. May I ask the Minister what the United Kingdom and the European Union are doing to support Aung San Suu Kyi's call for dialogue and to urge the regime to come to the table? Two months ago on 9 October, she met the British ambassador for the first time in at least six years. What was the outcome of that meeting and what attempts are being made by the United Kingdom to secure further such meetings?

Aung San Suu Kyi has stated clearly to the regime that she would like to work with it to

"create conditions conducive to lifting of sanctions on Burma".

Let us be clear that the conditions conducive to lifting sanctions do not yet exist. The United States has made it clear that it will maintain existing sanctions while pursing high-level engagement, until there are clear and tangible signs of meaningful progress. Does the Minister agree with me that the European Union should not lift any sanctions unless and until all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, are released; a nationwide ceasefire against ethic nationalities is declared; and a meaningful and irreversible process of tripartite dialogue between the regime, the National League for Democracy and the ethnic nationalities is begun? Furthermore, does he agree that unless the regime ends its campaign of brutality against the ethnic nationalities, the next European Union common position on Burma should tighten sanctions, including the introduction of new targeted financial sanctions such as a ban on insurance companies, which would affect some of the sectors from which the regime benefits most?

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about engagement, but would it not be best to talk to our friends in the Chinese embassy in this country to try to get the Chinese Government to put pressure on the Burmese regime, with which it has a close relationship?

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. There is no doubt that China is a superpower and has an influential role to play. I believe that it abdicates its responsibility when it fails to do so. I hope that in the

[Mr. Evans]

coming months, we will see China play a more positive role in trying to ensure that Aung San Suu Kyi and the other political prisoners are released in Burma.

Mr. Hoyle: Further to that point, here we have the evil regime in China propping up the regime in Burma. In fairness, we could ask the people of Tibet just how good China is. I do not hold out much hope. It is also interesting that the largest democracy in the world, India, also supports this evil regime. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we could do more through the Commonwealth to put pressure on India to stop supporting Burma?

Mr. Evans: I have made reference to China and will refer to India as well. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, it is the largest democracy in the world and a leading member of our Commonwealth, of which we are just one member. I hope that India uses its immense influence in the region to bring about the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the other 2,000 political prisoners in Burma, which include 200 Buddhist monks.

Some political prisoners have been sentenced to extraordinary terms, some to 65 years or more. Several prominent political prisoners need urgent medical treatment, but have been denied it by the regime. In particular, there is an immediate need for medical treatment for U Gambira, who has contracted malaria in Kale prison in Sagaing division; Min Ko Naing, who is suffering from a severe eye condition and high blood pressure; and Zaw Htet Ko Ko, who is suffering from serious gastric problems. What steps is the Minister taking to urge the authorities in Burma to ensure that all prisoners receive proper medical treatment? What steps is he taking to highlight the plight of political prisoners and to make their release a priority?

I have mentioned the plight of the ethnic nationalities. Let me describe it in more detail. The State Peace and Development Council is pursuing a campaign of ethnic cleansing. In eastern Burma, more than 3,300 villages have been destroyed and more than a million people internally displaced since 1996. Rape as a weapon of war, forced labour and the use of human minesweepers are widespread and systematic. Burma has the highest number of forcibly conscripted child soldiers in the world. Those are crimes against humanity.

This year, the Burma army has intensified its attacks in Karen state, driving thousands across the border into Thailand. Women and children are among the victims. For example, on 26 August a Karen woman, Ma Khin Kyi, was shot and severely wounded in the neck, jaw and mouth. Relief teams who provided assistance said that she was unlikely to survive because she was unable to eat or drink. On 27 December 2008, the body of a seven-year-old girl was found near her home after she had been raped and shot dead by a soldier from the Burma army.

The Karen are not the only ethnic group that has faced such offensives. In August, more than 10,000 people were driven from their homes in Shan state. At least 100 were arrested and tortured, and at least three people were killed. One woman was shot while trying to retrieve her possessions from a burning house and her body was thrown into a pit latrine. Another woman was gang-raped in front of her husband. On 3 August, soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion 514 attacked and beheaded a 29-year-old woman.

In Chin State, the people face severe religious persecution, as documented by Christian Solidarity Worldwide in the report, "Carrying the Cross," which was published two years ago. The Chin's suffering is compounded by a chronic food shortage that the regime has done nothing to address. The plight of the Kachin people should not be ignored. The Kachin have a ceasefire with the regime, but still the abuses continue. The Rohingya are primarily Muslim people and are denied citizenship, despite having lived in northern Arakan state for generations.

Bob Spink: The hon. Gentleman is at a particularly moving part of his speech. I have actually been in the jungle and have met the Burmese, the Karen, the Kachin and the Chin ethnic groups. I have seen the evidence of these atrocities—many more than he has outlined for us—and I have met the Myanmarian. There are more than 100,000 refugees in the Thai border refugee camps. I can testify to the accuracy of the odious statements that he is making.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that contribution, and for the documentation that Baroness Cox has sent me. She visited Mizoram and the people of Chinland from 15 to 30 November 2009, and she has presented me with a very moving report about the atrocities that are taking place in Burma.

A new report, "Crimes in Burma", has been published by the Harvard Law School and was commissioned by five of the world's leading jurists, including the former deputy prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, and Justice Richard Goldstone. That report concludes that

"there is a prima facie case of international criminal law violations occurring that demands UN Security Council action to establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate these grave breaches further".

The jurists conclude that these violations

"may amount to war crimes, as well as crimes against humanity".

The report draws almost exclusively on the UN's own statements. By the UN's own admission—in resolutions of the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council and the International Labour Organisation and in reports by four consecutive special rapporteurs—the human rights violations in Burma are "systematic and widespread". In 1998, the then special rapporteur stated that the violations by the regime

"have been so numerous and consistent over the past years as to suggest that they are not simply isolated or the acts of individual misbehaviour by middle and lower-ranking officers but are rather the result of policy at the highest level, entailing political and legal responsibility."

In 2006, his successor reached a similar conclusion. Last month, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling on the regime in Burma

"to take urgent measures to put an end to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the targeting of persons belonging to particular ethnic groups, the targeting of civilians by military operations, and rape and other forms of sexual violence, and to end impunity."

The resolution also calls on the regime to end the

"systematic forced displacement of large numbers of persons within their country and other causes of refugee flows into neighbouring countries."

Will the Minister agree that the violations in Burma amount to violations of international law and may qualify as war crimes and crimes against humanity? Will he announce today that the United Kingdom will work to establish a UN commission of inquiry to investigate these crimes?

In 2008, a new constitution was introduced in a sham referendum. The new constitution guarantees the military a quarter of the seats in parliament, disqualifies Aung San Suu Kyi from the presidency, and excludes former political prisoners from contesting elected office. The constitution has been described by the General Secretary of the Karen National Union as a

"death sentence for ethnic diversity".

As the regime plans to hold elections next year, will the Minister agree that, unless the constitution is revised through an inclusive process, the elections will offer no hope of freedom or human rights and will simply enshrine military rule?

The military regime in Burma is widely regarded as among the worst in the world. The regime spends more than 40 per cent. of its budget on the military, and less than $1 per person per year on health and education combined. I welcome the leadership that the United Kingdom—particularly the Prime Minister—has given on the issue of Burma over the past two years, and the support that the Government have expressed for a universal arms embargo. However, will the Minister tell hon. Members what proactive steps the Government are taking to propose a universal arms embargo at the UN Security Council?

Burma is ranked by the Heritage Foundation as one of five most repressive economies in the world, by Transparency International UK as the third most corrupt country in the world, by Reporters Without Borders as one of the worst violators of press freedom, by the Committee to Protect Journalists as the worst country for internet bloggers, by the US Department of State as one of the worst violators of religious freedom, by Minority Rights Group International as one of the top five countries where ethnic minorities are under threat, by Médecins sans Frontières as one of the top 10 humanitarian crises in the world, by the genocide risk indices as one of the top two red alert countries for genocide along with Sudan, and by Freedom House as

"the worst of the worst".

The UN has placed Burma on a monitoring list for genocide. Considering that catalogue of horrors, it is time for the international community to take urgent action to address the political and humanitarian crisis in Burma.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the urgency of the debate. He is coming to the nub of the matter now in terms of India, China and our own Government. The test of the international community at the UN will be how quickly we can help to resolve the problems in Burma for its people.

Mr. Evans: I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the hon. Gentleman is right. I am coming to my conclusion. The important thing for this debate is that we keep the matter in people's minds. We last had a debate on the subject at the time of the cyclone, when we heard how repressive the regime could be in stopping aid getting through to the very people who needed it most. Now that cyclone has passed we must make absolutely certain that the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi, the political prisoners and, indeed, the ordinary people who live in fear in Burma is not forgotten. That is why this debate is particularly timely. The action we take now and in the first few weeks of 2010 will at least give the people of Burma some hope. Let us think about 2010.

Mr. Hoyle: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that what we actually need in Burma is free, open, transparent elections to take place without any military interference. What conclusion can he make to ensure that we can achieve that through the international community or through his own involvement with this House and in Europe?

Mr. Evans: Burma is not alone in this. Violations have taken place only recently—just this weekend—in Iran. We know what happens when free and transparent elections take place: the people really do speak out. I pay tribute to the bravery of people, both in Iran and Burma, who put their lives on the line in speaking out and taking action to try to bring about regime change within their own countries. One of the things that will have a huge impact is people within their own countries being motivated for regime change. However, they also need help and support.

These debates are important to those people, because they let them know that they are not forgotten. For those people who are in prison, for those who live in fear of persecution and, indeed, for their families, it is important that they know there are Members of Parliament and people in the United Kingdom who support them in their fight. They are not alone. We will not forget them, and we will act to give them the freedom that they are fighting for. Minister, can we please make sure that 2010 will deliver for the people of Burma?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): It is my intention to call Members for the winding-up speeches at 10.30. Can I get an indication of how many people would like to speak? I have got Stephen Crabb on the list, so he can provide the first contribution—he informed me that he would like to speak. May I ask who else wants to speak in the debate, so we can try to fit everybody in? *[Interruption.]* Dr. Pugh has indicated that he wants to speak. Okay, I call Stephen Crabb.

9.49 am

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing this important and timely debate, and thank him for doing so. He is a staunch defender of human rights and a true friend of the peoples of Burma, and I am please to have the opportunity to speak for a few minutes in this debate.

I will start by thanking the Burma Campaign, an organisation that operates with few resources, yet that punches far above its weight in ensuring that the issue does not move far from our agenda in this place. It does a sterling job in briefing MPs, peers and Ministers and ensuring that we return to the issue time and again,

[Mr. Stephen Crabb]

because it is too important to lose sight of. I also pay tribute to the work of people such as Ben Rogers at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which my hon. Friend has already mentioned, and Baroness Cox at the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust. Together, those individuals and their organisations have been doing some extremely important work on Burma, specifically in relation to some of the ethnic groups, such as the Karen, the Karenni and the Shan people of eastern Burma and the Chin people of western Burma, on the border with India, who are currently suffering in appalling conditions. I also pay tribute to the Minister and the Government for their work and the steps they have taken in recent years to respond to the growing crisis in Burma. The Minister and I have shared platforms on the issue before, so I know from talking with him that he has a personal commitment to this, and I look forward to his remarks.

I make no apologies if I repeat some of the points and evidence that my hon. Friend gave in his contribution. It is absolutely right and vital that we keep coming back to the issue, both for the people of Burma, who are currently suffering in appalling conditions, and because it is a test for us and for the international community on how well we deal with the worst of the worst. The situation in Burma is a litmus test to show how serious the international community is in giving real meaning to the terms of the universal declaration of human rights, the anniversary of which we will celebrate tomorrow on international human rights day. Are we serious about seeing basic civil freedoms upheld for all peoples everywhere throughout the world, or do we just pay lip service to those things?

Let us be clear: with the military junta in Burma, as my hon. Friend said, we are dealing with the worst of the worst gangster regimes to be found anywhere in the world. The regime continues to have one of the worst records for imprisoning political opponents and for forcibly recruiting child soldiers. In fact, it has the largest number of child soldiers of any army in the world. It is waging a brutal war on its ethnic minorities. It is a regime that turned the humanitarian crisis that followed Cyclone Nargis into a near-genocidal catastrophe. It is a regime that has, time and again, laughed in the face of the international community and run rings around the whole succession of toothless UN envoys and special representatives.

I will provide more detail by discussing the proposed UN commission of inquiry on the crimes of the Burmese regime. Following the failure to secure a UN Security Council resolution two years ago, it is vital that that issue is a top priority for the UN. I look forward to what the Minister has to say on the proposal for a commission of inquiry, which is being pushed for in this country by the Burma Campaign and across the world by the worldwide Burma democracy movement.

In October, in a statement to the 64th session of the UN General Assembly Third Committee, the UN special rapporteur on Burma described the human rights situation in that country as "alarming". He noted that

"there is a pattern of widespread and systematic violations"

and that

"the prevailing impunity allows for the continuation of these violations."

Would the Minister give a view on how best the proposal for a commission of inquiry could be taken forward and, indeed, whether he supports such a proposal? If he does not support such a commission, what alternative course of action are the Government pursuing at the UN to bring pressure to bear on the generals over their appalling record of human rights abuses?

Supporters of democracy are also pushing for a universal arms embargo on Burma, and stressing the need to build a global consensus to ensure that a true, universal arms embargo is imposed, which is now more necessary than ever. On 12 October 2008, the President of Timor-Leste, Dr. Jose Ramos Horta, added his voice to calls for a universal arms embargo on the Burma regime, stating that

"the events of the past two years in Burma have shocked the world...The deterioration in the political and humanitarian situation calls for a clear response by the international community...There can be no justification for selling arms to a regime which...uses those arms simply to suppress its own people".

A large number of countries have already signed up and support a global arms embargo, including the UK and many European countries. As far as I can see—the Minister can correct me if I am wrong—the British Government and the EU have stated that they support a global arms embargo but have taken few practical steps to secure it. Perhaps the Minister can set me straight on that.

I will move on to the detail of the recent reports by Baroness Cox, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley referred. Baroness Cox has just returned from a visit to Chin state and earlier this year visited eastern Burma and produced two excellent reports, which I strongly encourage the Minister and his colleagues at the Department for International Development to read in detail. Chin state is experiencing a deteriorating humanitarian situation and a famine caused by the flowering of bamboo and an infestation of rats, which has lead to serious food shortages and increased rates of morbidity and mortality. Children are not going to school, because they need to search for food or are too weak, and reports are coming through of entirely deserted villages and large migration flows of people into India, Malaysia, China and Thailand. At the same time, severe and grave human rights abuses continue to be perpetrated by Burmese military troops, who are dispersed across Chin state. There are reports of forced labour, torture, rape and the systematic refusal by the regime to provide anything like adequate health care. The result is widespread suffering in Chin state.

In 2008, DFID committed initial funding of £600,000, specifically to address the food crisis in Chin state. That sum was increased to £800,000 in March 2009, which we welcome. However, there is concern that in some areas, international funds for emergency food relief channelled through the UN Development Programme allegedly are being provided not as aid, but as loans that are repayable at rates of up to 200 per cent. If the Minister does not have the information to hand to respond to that point, would he write to me after the debate to assure me that more assistance will be provided to Chin state, and will he investigate the claims that in some areas, the UNDP is providing money in the form of loans charged at 200 per cent?

In eastern Burma, the absurdly named State Peace and Development Council—they are brutal military thugs—continues to inflict gross human rights abuses

on the Karen, the Karenni and the Shan peoples. In the so-called brown territories, human mine sweepers and forced labour are used. In many parts of the black areas, where there is a sustained military offensive by the Burmese regime, there is a shoot-to-kill policy and widespread reports of the torture and rape of civilians. There has been a large increase this year in the number of internally displaced people as a result of the military conflict. I understand that there are approximately 30,000 IDPs among the Karen people alone, hiding in the jungle in appalling conditions. Would the Minister update us on what steps he and his colleagues are taking to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those oppressed ethnic groups?

Is the Minister aware of the very difficult debates among the ethnic groups of Burma on how to respond to the forthcoming national elections? Should they participate or boycott them? They are loth to confer legitimacy on those elections by participating, but they are worried that by not voting they might lose the opportunity to provide evidence of vote rigging in future and that doing so will deny them any sliver of representation, however minimal, once those elections have taken place. Does the Minister agree that whatever decision those ethnic groups reach on whether to participate in the elections, the international community must not endorse the regime's sham elections and must lend no credibility whatever to the process? To do otherwise would be a huge disservice to the democracy movement in Burma and a massive setback for its ethnic peoples.

Bob Spink: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Karen, 30,000 of whom were displaced in the jungle. I have met some of those groups and seen the children walking three miles to carry water in old petrol cans. I met the elders and saw the conditions in which they lived, with no health service, no family planning for the young girls and no education. That really needs to be tackled by the international community.

Mr. Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. The convergence of difficult humanitarian conditions with gross human rights abuses is creating a dire set of circumstances for the oppressed ethnic groups.

Moving on to the subject of political engagement, in September, the US Administration announced the outcome of their review of US policy towards Burma, something which many of us were watching closely. A general welcome, which I support, has been given to the noises being made by the new US Administration, but I have some questions which I would like to put to the Minister. I have read in detail the transcript of the report by Kurt Campbell, an official from the US State Department, on why there has been a slight change of tack on the part of the Obama Administration in respect of Burma. What does the Minister think that it has shifted? Has there been any substantive shift at all on the part of the Burmese regime which has led the US Government to announce that they are willing to engage in some form of political dialogue? What gesture or shift has there been by the Burmese Government? As far as I can tell, there has been none.

For example, there has been no release of political prisoners or move in the direction of improving the conditions in which Aung San Suu Kyi is held, let alone any talk of her being released. So what have the Burmese Government done to deserve the announcement that the US Government are now willing to engage in dialogue with them? The risk surely is that their status as a reprehensible pariah is slightly reduced by this shift on the part of the Obama Administration, and unless there is real toughness on the part of the international community, particularly the US Government, in upholding sanctions and being absolutely firm on the conditions under which they will engage with the Burmese Government, the Burmese Government will achieve an important gain.

Mr. Hoyle: The problem is that two members of the BRIC countries are the biggest countries that prop Burma up; that is where our difficulty is. Human rights in China are not different from human rights in Burma. What can we do about India and China? That is the big issue.

Mr. Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. China and India, particularly China, are hugely influential in discussions about the future of Burma. We must also consider the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which has not been mentioned so far in this debate. I shall come on to it in a second, but first would like to conclude my comments on US policy.

My fear is that the US has changed tack slightly because of other regional issues across Asia, North Korea and China, and that Burma risks becoming part of a subset of a wider set of geopolitical issues and therefore does not receive the specific and dedicated attention that it deserves. We need to hold on to it as a human rights and humanitarian issue. It is not part of a subset of a wider range of geopolitical questions. I have said before in the House that we need a much more intelligent approach to ASEAN. Two years ago, through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, I was able to visit three ASEAN countries shortly after the ASEAN summit in which discussion of Burma featured heavily. It is clear that politicians and Governments in Asia do not have quite the same view of human and civil rights as we do, and that they do not see Burma in the same way that we do. It is important that while we engage with them and try to understand their position, they understand just how reprehensible the Burmese Government are in our view. If they want the EU to take ASEAN more seriously as a representative organisation for Asian economies, they need to understand that there are certain things that they need to fix within their club, Burma being one of them. I look forward to what the Minister and other speakers have to say.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Thank you very much for a thoughtful contribution, Mr. Crabb.

10.4 am

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing this important debate. I had not intended to speak at any length this morning. This is more a question of a few observations off the back of my chairing the all-party Burma group last week. The fact that I was doing it and not someone more exalted—for example, people such as the Speaker are very much involved in the all-party group—shows that there was a somewhat thin attendance. That was slightly disappointing.

[Dr. John Pugh]

Baroness Cox, the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan) and I were there. In addition, there was a contingent of Karen people who had come to inform us about their plight in a touching way. There were people there who, in the course of giving testimony, broke down in tears as they described not general events but events that had happened specifically to their family. It was a difficult time for MPs, but I am glad to say that today there is wider representation, and I am sure that all MPs, whether able to be here or not, fully recognise the awful plight of the Burmese.

I would like to relate to the Minister how the people who came to see us the other day have an almost touching, slightly naive faith in what we can do for them. They treasure democracy, they are exiles in this country, and they are aware of the huge and manifest difference between their plight in Burma and their situation in the UK. We might grumble about our country from time to time, but they certainly do not.

Their purpose, and the purpose of the meeting, was twofold. One was to verify the charges against the Burmese Government through eloquent testimony. I pay tribute to Baroness Cox who, from her own experience and reports that she has prepared, was able to amplify and add to that. The Burmese people listed on an individual and collective basis things that hon. Members have already spoken about such as the use of forced labour, the displacement of people, the use of rape as a policy instrument, the malnutrition and all the other awful effects that follow consequently. That has been done umpteen times in this place, in the media and throughout the world.

The other object of the meeting was to show a way forward, and I have to say that at first I was slightly sceptical about it. The main burden of the meeting was to put across the idea that a United Nations inquiry stimulated by activities at Harvard Law School could do some positive good and be a small step forward. One may think that that is a somewhat doomed strategy because one knows that, in the world of realpolitik, the Chinese and Indian Governments and many other interests in south Asia have little interest in taking the Burmese issue head on. In fact, I voiced some of that scepticism while chairing the meeting, because I thought that people needed to recognise what could and could not be done. However, they impressed on me the idea that the activity by itself, if done on an official basis through the UN, would not be futile, because evidence against previous serial abusers of human rights such as Saddam Hussein and Milosevic has often been collected prior to their apprehension, downfall and conviction. That kind of evidence and inquiry has a horrible habit of coming back to haunt the culprits—the people who currently are, or feel that they are, safe and secure. That is one positive reason for getting on with an inquiry.

A second positive reason is that the people who suffer genuinely want official international recognition of their suffering and the abuse of power and human rights. The victims genuinely want that, and certainly the people who I saw last week wanted that, even if it did nothing other than to declare that recognition and announce it to the world, thereby ensuring that nobody could be in any doubt about it.

The third reason why the strategy might do some good—I would take some persuasion about this, and people may have more than one view about it—is that perpetrators, even people who are in a secure position in their country, backed by their own military and currently in charge, do not welcome international condemnation. They do not like the idea simply because, in the back of their mind, they know that there is insecurity attached to all power and that, at some point, whether in the Third Reich or other regimes, the chickens can come home to roost.

So there are four practical things that we can do for the people of Burma, and there is a range of people for whom we need to do things. The Shan and Karen people have been mentioned, as well as pro-democracy people in the cities, the monks and so on. Those things are fairly obvious and the Government can do all of them. They can continue to support sanctions, although I am not optimistic about that as a strategy to change the nature of events, because of the influence of China and so on. We can do our utmost—we hon. Members are doing so today, I guess—to publicise the issue to try to get a bit of media attention for what is surely an intolerable situation. But as the campaigners themselves mentioned, the press are fickle. The strange thing about suffering is that if it goes on and on and is always there it does not get reported, although it is all the worse for being so perpetual.

Thirdly, we can put pressure on India through the Commonwealth, as the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) mentioned in his intervention. India genuinely has a part to play here and we should not exonerate it from its responsibilities. India has its own human rights issues, as does China, but it surely cannot play its current role and be seen as totally supportive of human rights. India must do more to assist the people of Burma, if only because it gets the outfall of that problem—the refugees coming across its border and into parts of that country that are deprived and cannot stand extra burdens imposed on them.

Fourthly, we must press for the United Nations inquiry, on which we want an answer from the Minister today. I was sceptical about that inquiry and did not think that it would necessarily do any good, and I can see all the problems that it could incur with other members of the UN, but pushing in that direction is a step forward. Even if I did not think that, the people I spoke to a week ago thought so, and that is one good reason for doing it.

I hope that our Government will take all those four steps.

10.11 am

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Mr. Hancock, it is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing this debate, which is timely, as he said. It has been an interesting debate, as debates often are in Westminster Hall. In particular, real value has been added by those hon. Members who have brought to bear their personal experience of talking face to face to the individuals who have been living with the consequences of this horrible regime. I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh).

I would like to touch on the elections, the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis and the human rights situation, many aspects of which have been explored by hon. Members in some detail. I shall focus on what the response might be and what we and the rest of the international community might be able to do.

The most high-profile symbol of the corruption and anti-democratic and repressive nature of the regime in Burma is the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi. We should bear in mind that her detention has now lasted 14 years—it is sometimes difficult to imagine such a huge amount of time—yet still she retains the faith, strength and ability to keep going. During that time there have been little false glimmers of hope. Burma's Foreign Ministry has told the Associated Press that the junta plans to release Dr. Suu Kyi from house arrest to allow her to organise her party before the elections in March 2010. But before we get too hopeful about that, we should remember that the regime has dashed such hopes in the past. For example, in 2004, the then Burmese Foreign Minister Win Aung promised the UN envoy that she would be released, but in May 2007 her term of house arrest was extended for another year. It would be a fabulous outcome if her release were to be secured, but that is still in doubt. Even if she were released before the elections, there is still a huge challenge to face and a long way to go before Burma is anything approaching a democracy, because, as has been mentioned, the constitution would prevent her from standing for election even if released.

In preparing for such debates, I always find new information: in this case, horrific new information. As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley mentioned, a quarter of the 440 seats in the Burmese Assembly are automatically given to the military. When I read that I could not believe the total brazenness of the regime's changing the constitution to reserve a quarter of the seats for the military junta. In this circumstance, people are left thinking, what chance is there for democracy unless there is wholesale change of the constitution?

The horror runs much deeper even than the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the difficulties with the constitution, because the number of political prisoners has more than doubled since the beginning of 2007, according to Human Rights Watch. More than 2,100 people are detained in 43 prisons and over 50 labour camps, where they are forced into hard labour projects. Anybody who speaks out against military rule is routinely locked up. There is no such thing as a free press. That shows us that, even if the junta follows through this time and releases Dr. Suu Kyi, that is little more than a token gesture to try to make the elections seem credible: it is not a commitment to democratisation. Having said that, we must still push for the junta to do that.

I now turn to the aftermath of the cyclone that hit in 2008. We need to remember the destruction that that caused: 140,000 people dead or missing, which is a huge natural disaster on any scale. But, of course, that natural disaster was compounded by the authorities' refusal properly to allow aid agencies to get in and do their work. I remember the debates in the House at that time and the indignation around the world about what happened. However, we have not heard the story of what has happened since.

Amnesty International has reported that, as recently as October this year, the Burmese authorities arrested at least 10 journalists and political activists for accepting relief donations from abroad for survivors of the cyclone, because more than 18 months after that devastation the authorities have not dealt with it. The aid is still needed, yet the regime continues to make arrests and lock people up for doing no more than trying to help those whose lives have been devastated by the natural disaster.

Mr. Evans: At the time of the cyclone, when the United States was sending aid, the regime preferred to see its people die while it repackaged some of that aid so that the people receiving it did not know that it came from the US. Does not that say everything that we need to know about the regime? It would rather see its people die than let them see where the aid has come from.

Jo Swinson: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful intervention, with which I think all hon. Members would agree. It is almost inconceivable that a regime could be so heartless and so unbothered by its people's suffering. Burma still needs extra funding for new houses, cyclone shelters, livelihood programmes, water and sanitation—the basic tools of life—and education and health services. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of people. Yet the funding has not properly flowed.

Only £75 million has been committed to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations tripartite core group's post-cyclone recovery project, which is expected to cost £415 million. I congratulate the Government on the Department for International Development funding for the aid programme, which rose from £12.5 million last year to £25 million this year, and on the plans to increase it further to £28 million in 2010-11. In the context of difficult economic circumstances, that shows a commitment from this Government, but it is not enough on its own, which is why I am also pleased that they are encouraging other donors to increase their aid contributions.

Cyclone Nargis did not get the same coverage around the world as other disasters, such as the tsunami. Although the cyclone was prominent in our news media, it was not quite at the same level as the tsunami, because—this is a big aspect—journalists with cameras were not able to report freely in the country, so there was not the same number of pictures to accompany the story. The broadcast and print media are driven by pictures so Burma suffered doubly, because the public donations were not as high as they might have been had the natural disaster happened in a country where media coverage could have been greater. The Government aid programmes are even more important because of that.

The hon. Gentleman's speech was particularly powerful when he painted a grim picture of the repression of minorities, especially the use of rape as a weapon of war. The internal conflict between the military rulers and the minority ethnic groups in Burma has continued for the past 60 years, and the sad truth is that it is increasingly common in such conflicts that a frequent mode of attack is a systematic policy for soldiers to rape women and children.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women submitted a report on Burma to the UN General Assembly in November 2008 in which it expressed its

"deep concern at the high prevalence of sexual and other forms of violence, including rape, perpetrated by members of the armed forces against rural ethnic women, including Shan, Mon, Karen, Palaung and Chin women."

[Jo Swinson]

It notes that the perpetrators have virtual impunity. Only a few cases have ever been prosecuted, and it reports intimidation of those who are brave enough to come forward even to complain. There is obvious violation of UN Security Council resolution 1820 on sexual violence in armed conflict. I am pleased that this year the UK co-sponsored Security Council resolution 1888, which led the council to appoint a special representative to tackle sexual violence in armed conflict. That is important in Burma and, sadly, in other countries.

The UK has a strong record on tackling violence against women, but I understand from a parliamentary answer that the Government are not putting forward a UK candidate for the new post and I would be interested to hear, today or later in writing, why, and who they will support. It is obviously vital that the special representative can put the matter at the heart of the international community, and ensure that it is, rightly, high on the agenda.

Dr. Pugh: On rape as a matter of policy, I have been told by people from the Karen community that the sinister ideological rationalisation is that the military rulers regard the tribes as troublesome and feel that by diluting the gene pool through rape and the creation of mixed-breed children they are doing their bit to progress ethnic cleansing. That is a particularly revolting rationalisation.

Jo Swinson: I agree. It is hard even to listen to such a rationalisation, and to hear that the individuals involved think that they are, as my hon. Friend puts it, doing their bit.

Going through the catalogue of horrors—that phrase was rightly used earlier—brings us to what our response should be. Within the international community there seems to have been some movement recently. Obviously, the Government have targeted sanctions against the regime at EU and UN levels, and my party has supported that. I echo the calls for a universal arms embargo, because there can be no justification for selling arms to such a regime.

Barack Obama has decided to try to engage with the military junta in a break from the Bush policy of isolation, but I do not know whether a specific event, other than the change of presidency, prompted that change in strategy. Aung San Suu Kyi has expressed support for sanctions, but more recently has offered to co-operate in getting them lifted. Dr. Suu Kyi's conditions for agreeing to co-operate are not yet clear, but the commitment will obviously not be open-ended. It would be helpful if the Minister enlightened the debate on the conditions that Dr. Suu Kyi has specified, and whether the Government would agree with her if such progress were made, and review their approach to the regime. Obviously, if she, as an individual in the country, can achieve some progress, that might be an alternative strategy. I echo calls from hon. Members to use every diplomatic lever at our disposal to persuade India and China in particular, who have a strong influence in Burma, to put pressure on the regime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southport made a powerful case for the UN inquiry, and perhaps it is even more powerful as it comes from someone who was previously a sceptic. I hope that the Government will support those calls.

Bob Spink: As the hon. Lady is mentioning other countries, will she mention the two roles that Thailand is playing? One is a positive role in allowing refugee camps on the border, which is extremely good of it. It is trying to care for those people as best it can. On the other hand, it is trading with and propping up politically the odious regime in Burma. It is involved in some of the large and illegal infrastructure projects on ethnic people's land in Burma. There is tension in Thailand, and we must maintain pressure on the Thai Government.

Jo Swinson: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well, and although China and India are key players, we should not forget that other countries also play a role.

The hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb) asked whether we are serious about getting to grips with human rights issues, and the question is appropriate. Westminster Hall debates on foreign affairs are often depressing. By their nature, they tend to be about the world's problems rather than shining examples of good practice and success. Debates during the past few weeks have been on Iran, human rights in China, the death penalty, and Burma, so it is right to ask the question. Human rights abuses are so severe and, sadly, so prevalent throughout the world, that it is important to highlight them, and to ask whether we are doing everything we can. Having said that, we can be proud of some aspects of our record, and I give credit where it is due to the Government, but we should never stop asking the question.

The Government have a good record, and sanctions have been an important part of that. If things change in the country, we would need to review our strategy, particularly if the change in the US's strategy bears fruit. As many hon. Members have outlined, the human rights situation in Burma is dire, and it is vital that the Government use every tool at their disposal to put pressure on the Burmese regime to bring the awful abuses to an end.

10.27 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure, Mr. Hancock, to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on raising this issue. He and other hon. Members who have spoken from both sides of the Chamber have a track record of raising the matter. Many of us feel the presence of the Speaker hovering over us. In a previous incarnation, when he was a troublesome and noisy Back Bencher, he had a distinguished track record of raising this issue and speaking out both in Parliament and outside.

The last Westminster Hall debate on Burma was in December 2007, but the matter has been raised during other Westminster Hall debates—for example, the debates on China and the west in October, on India in May, and on human rights in December 2008. On 9 June there was an Adjournment debate on the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi. Burma is not just a stand-alone issue; it has a thread in other areas. It is important to understand that the context is not just the suffering of the Burmese people, but the wider issue of human rights.

As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said, anyone who discusses foreign affairs and UK policy may become depressed that so many countries are carrying out the most horrendous crimes

against their own ethnic people or their ethnic minorities. That applies on a much smaller scale in Zimbabwe, North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Tibet of course, and a raft of others. The issue that we must address as parliamentarians and in terms of the Government is what we can realistically do to bring pressure to bear on regimes that do not respond easily to outside pressure to modify or, hopefully, to stop their behaviour.

I am conscious of one other element as far as Burma is concerned. We governed Burma for a period of 80 or 90 years, so it might be that we have a moral debt. Many of us have not forgotten that during the second world war, many Burmese people suffered horrendously under occupation. Many of those ethnic groups who are the most persecuted, aided the Commonwealth armies, hid British and Commonwealth troops who had been left behind, and faced the most horrendous consequences for what they did. There is an additional moral imperative.

Let me touch briefly on a number of issues, some of which have already been raised by colleagues. First is the question of the US policy review. The Americans have carried out a major review on how to engage with Burma, which I suggest is part of a wider Obama strategy of trying to engage with a whole raft of regimes, of which Iran is another example. However, that does not mean that all other elements should not be used as well. The Obama Government have concluded—quite rightly—that the idea that one should not engage directly or indirectly with a regime is a false position in which to be. It does not use an important weapon that a Government have at their disposal—that of diplomacy.

The Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, told a Senate hearing:

> "Lifting or easing sanctions at the outset of a dialogue without meaningful progress on our concerns would be a mistake…any easing of sanctions now would send the wrong signal".

The Americans are not prepared to ease sanctions without seeing some degree of progress, but as a number of colleagues have asked: how do we define that progress? What type of US engagement will be pursued, and how will the US ensure that it is co-ordinated with the rest of the international community? Perhaps the Minister can clarify that, because the international approach is crucial.

That brings me to the role of the United Nations. Last week, the UN announced that the UN special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, will become head of the UN-African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur. He will assume that position on 1 January next year, and his replacement is currently being sought. I do not know whether the Minister can give us information on any name that might be in the frame.

The military junta failed on a number of occasions to give Mr. Gambari a visa. He managed to meet Aung San Suu Kyi during one visit to the country, but interestingly, she refused to meet him on a later occasion. There has been considerable criticism of Mr. Gambari on the grounds that he did not have a sufficiently robust attitude towards the Burmese regime. Over the past 40 years, there have been 40 visits to Burma by UN envoys.

Mr. Crabb: My hon. Friend is being very measured and diplomatic in his description of Mr. Gambari's effectiveness. I was not aware that Mr. Gambari had been appointed to a role in Darfur. How much optimism does my hon. Friend have for the work that Mr. Gambari will do in Darfur, given that he was such a manifest flop during his work in Burma?

Mr. Simpson: I do not know whether it is an insult or a compliment to hear that I am being measured. Perhaps I am doing my Sir Humphrey act. If I were a Foreign Office mandarin, which I am not—although I probably look like one from the 1950s—I would say that Mr. Gambari is going to be "challenged" in Darfur. There is no doubt about that. I agree with my hon. Friend: it is an amazing appointment given Mr. Gambari's demonstrable failure to engage with the Burmese regime. That does not mean that another UN envoy would have no trouble in engaging with that regime, but most independent observers regard Mr. Gambari's work there as a failure. I hope that whoever is appointed as his successor will be more robust in dealing with the regime.

What further discussions have representatives of the UK Government had with Aung San Suu Kyi following her meeting with the British Ambassador, Andrew Heyn, on 9 October 2009? What opportunities are there for engagement between the UK Government and representatives from Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League of Democracy, in advance of the 2010 elections?

A number of colleagues touched on the 2010 elections, and it has already been pointed out that the new constitution guarantees the military one quarter of the seats in both the upper and lower houses of the new national Parliament. The UK Government have strongly criticised the planned elections. Earlier this year in answer to a written question, a Minister stated:

> "The military regime in Burma is determined to maintain its hold on power regardless of the cost and suffering of its people. The junta's 'Roadmap to disciplined democracy'."

—that has a wonderful sound of 1984 to it—

> "including a new constitution and elections planned for 2010, is designed to entrench military rule behind a facade of civilian government."—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 356W.]

It is clear that the 2010 elections planned by the military junta do not represent genuine progress towards democracy. Will the Minister outline the conditions that the UK Government think are necessary for a credible election process? How can we measure those in the forthcoming months?

A number of colleagues have mentioned EU sanctions. Will the Minister assure us that existing EU sanctions will not be relaxed until clear progress is made by the Burmese regime, including an end to human rights abuses and the oppression of minorities? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that existing UK sanctions on the import of timber and gems from Burma are enforced, and not violated as is currently the case? That is only a small part of the sanctions, but it is important and involves members of the regime personally.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has been mentioned. There is no doubt that the ability of the ASEAN powers to put pressure on Burma is considerable, at least in theory. Many of us have been disappointed over the past few years that some ASEAN countries have not been more robust towards Burma. Burma's main outlet to the world is through ASEAN meetings and conferences. I hope that the British Government, both bilaterally and in direct relations with ASEAN, will bring more pressure to bear on

[Mr. Keith Simpson]

ASEAN countries, and stand up for what many of those countries believe about democratic accountability, free elections and so on.

I will conclude with a number of final points. First, we are all overwhelmed by the tales of suffering that we hear, not only via the media but through personal meetings with people who have been in Burma, and from Burmese minorities. The Burmese people are not alone in their suffering as there are many other regimes, but they are a quiet, dignified people, and it is important that we speak up on their behalf through Parliament. It is depressing that over the past four years in which I have participated in such debates, we have seen only a small amount of progress. However, we can at least collectively express our outrage through Parliament. I hope that in a positive, rather than negative way, we can put pressure on the British Government so that the Foreign Office can say to countries, "Pressure is being brought to bear on us by the democratic representatives of the British people".

We need a dual track of attempts at dialogue with the Burmese Government, but also to put pressure on them and their neighbours, crucially, as colleagues have mentioned, the two big states. The first of those states is India, which is a member of the British Commonwealth. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), who is no longer in the Chamber, about using the good offices of the Commonwealth. The second state is China, which I know is less easy. The Chinese do not wish to discuss their relations with a whole raft of regimes throughout the world, about which it is to their economic benefit to keep quiet regarding demonstrable crimes against humanity and, in some cases, war crimes. Nevertheless, the British Government have a duty to be quite robust with the Chinese Government on the matter. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the shadow Foreign Secretary, raises these points whenever we meet senior members of the Chinese Government.

The pressure exerted through the United Nations is also crucial. The hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) made a very important observation, recognising that he had not originally been persuaded of this. Many of these regimes may brush aside the threat of a war crimes inquiry, but I think it gnaws at their vitals. It makes them incredibly careful about where they travel to and they are always fearful that one day or other, their regime might fall.

Regime change does not usually happen quickly. I just scribbled down some notes on this, à la the old staff college lecturer in me. Regime change can come about internally; ultimately, there can be a revolution or coup d'état. It can come about externally, by two methods. One is what happened to the old white Rhodesian regime when the South African Government literally turned the power off and said, "That's it, gentlemen. It's the endgame. We're not prepared to support you any more." There is a chance that that could still happen, ironically, in Zimbabwe, but the current South African Government do not want to do it. The Chinese could probably bring about regime change in North Korea by switching the power off, but for understandable reasons, they do not want to do so.

Finally, there is the threat of force. One of the great tragedies of international relations in the past decade relates to the fact that there was a narrow window of opportunity after 9/11 when the world actively supported and sympathised with the United States of America. The American threat of force and, indeed, its intervention against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan caused many regimes suddenly to change their attitude and policies. The North Koreans shifted—they were absolutely terrified—and Colonel Gaddafi, who, crab-like, was already moving in that direction, moved very quickly indeed. Sadly, that has gone, but at least the threat of force should never be removed from the diplomatic table. If the threat of force is removed, there is no requirement on these odious regimes to make any change at all.

I hope that the Minister will accept not my remarks but the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley, who initiated the debate, and of other hon. Members in the way in which they were made, which I hope he will regard as both constructive and supportive.

10.42 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing this important Adjournment debate and on the passionate and authentic way in which he presented our shared concerns on the human rights abuses that continue to scar Burma and the issues of greatest concern to the international community. The debate has displayed a unity of purpose, shared concern and a determination to find ways to adopt practical measures that will influence the regime and move the situation forward.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb) for his long-standing work on raising the profile and the issue of Burma in the House and for his work to promote the need to take more decisive action. I join the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) in paying tribute to the work, over a very long time, of Mr. Speaker in championing this issue and ensuring that Britain regards it as a priority.

I am sure that hon. Members would acknowledge on a cross-party basis that this matter concerns my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister very deeply. He has given the issue a considerable amount of his personal attention and leadership. He has rightly described Aung San Suu Kyi as one of the most courageous individuals of our lifetime—of our generation—as a result of the sacrifices and suffering that she has had to tolerate because she has stayed true to her people and her principles. She has suffered a lot of personal pain and tragedy as a consequence.

We share the deep concern of hon. Members on both sides of the House for the Burmese people—the concern about the multiple humanitarian crises, appalling human rights abuses and the fact that there has been precious little progress towards genuine democracy. We are committed to doing all we can, in a number of ways, to help the people of Burma to a better future, as hon. Members suggested. Tough EU sanctions targeted at the regime leadership underline our determination to see real political reform. Robust dialogue makes our

concerns clear, but also emphasises our readiness to respond to progress. With regard to humanitarian aid, the UK, as hon. Members said, is the largest donor this year, alongside Japan, which genuinely makes a difference in alleviating the suffering of Burma's poor.

On the points made by the hon. Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire and for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), there is concern that people are being charged for some of the aid; that is what we are told. The UNDP is investigating those allegations as a matter of urgency, and we will report to the House when we receive clarification of exactly what is happening on the ground. Our key objectives remain the release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi—we should remember that there are more than 2,000 political prisoners—and the start of a genuine process of political dialogue involving all opposition and ethnic groups. The elections planned for 2010—hon. Members asked where we stood on this—will have no international legitimacy unless those and other steps are taken as a matter of urgency. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle).

The hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk asked, reasonably, what credible steps would allow us to take a more sympathetic view of the elections next year. First, the very constitution on which the elections are based would have to be changed, because it inherently means an unfair process and an unfair outcome. Inevitably, the release not only of Aung San Suu Kyi but all political prisoners would be necessary before any elections, to give sufficient time for those people to participate and to organise appropriately by campaigning and making their pitch to the people of Burma. The regime would have to take many steps in a very short time for us to be willing to consider those elections as having any legitimacy whatever, and I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that there is very little sign of the regime being willing to do that.

Many hon. Members raised the question of our contact with other countries and with international institutions. I assure them that we use every opportunity to make the case as to why those countries with the closest relationships with Burma should be doing more to make it clear to the regime that its behaviour is intolerable. The Prime Minister has discussed Burma in the past few weeks with the Prime Minister of Japan and the UN Secretary-General. In September, he raised Burma with the Chinese President. He has raised it on a number of occasions recently with the Prime Minister of India. There are many such occasions. Whenever we are involved in bilateral discussions at the highest levels, we constantly raise Burma and we acknowledge the point that hon. Members have made—arguably, those countries that have the closest relationships with the Burmese regime are in the best position to exercise influence. They are allies of ours and are countries with which we have a largely positive relationship, and we make it clear that it matters to our bilateral relationship that they take their responsibilities seriously with regard to human rights in Burma.

We are also working closely with the US, Australia and European Union partners. We agree with the US that any relaxation of sanctions must be only in response to tangible progress. The EU has not ruled out further sanctions if the situation deteriorates. The UK was instrumental in securing additional financial measures when Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced in August to a further 18 months under house arrest. We continue to support the efforts of the UN Secretary-General and his good offices mission. The UN has a central role to play.

The hon. Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire, for East Dunbartonshire and for Mid-Norfolk asked about US dialogue. Previously, the Americans' position was one of isolation and sanctions, but they have adopted one of engagement and sanctions following their review. It must be made clear, however, that there is absolutely no sign that the US, the EU or the international community has any intention of reducing economic sanctions against the regime, because we have seen no significant shift whatever from it so far. This is not an either/or scenario. It is perfectly reasonable, as the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk said, to have a strategy of engagement and sanctions. If we looked at the strategy adopted until the Americans undertook their review, we would see that they were right to decide that it was time to move from isolation and sanctions to engagement and sanctions.

Hon. Members have asked about the ASEAN countries, and I have raised these issues with ASEAN ambassadors on a couple of occasions—indeed, we constantly raise them. The ASEAN countries are an emerging institution, and the UK should engage with its power brokers and economies in a more positive and meaningful way. It is worth noting, however, that ASEAN recently set up a commission on human rights, so it recognises that it has a lot of work to do specifically on human rights. We should support the establishment of that commission, but we should ensure that it undertakes meaningful work and begins to pressure ASEAN members over their human rights performance. We will keep a close eye on progress.

I turn now to the contact that our ambassador and our country have recently had with Aung San Suu Kyi. The meeting that took place between our ambassador and Aung San Suu Kyi on 9 October was a small but welcome development. She requested the meeting to discuss sanctions, and we invited US and Australian representatives to attend. At the meeting, she asked for information on the scope, impact and intent behind EU sanctions, and our ambassador answered her questions and provided additional written material afterwards. Importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi was seeking information, rather than setting out a clear position.

To respond to the question from the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk, we are of course keen for further meetings to take place, and we have made that clear to the Burmese authorities. No further meeting has yet taken place, but we do have regular dialogue with the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi's party. Subsequent to the meeting on 9 October, Aung San Suu Kyi sent a second letter to Than Shwe asking for a meeting with him. It will be interesting to see how the regime responds—it still has to respond—to that formal request.

If I might update hon. Members, we have been told that Aung San Suu Kyi today had a 50-minute meeting with the Burmese Liaison Minister, which is an interesting step forward. However, we should also note that the state media recently described Aung San Suu Kyi's initiative as dishonest, which remains a cause of concern. However, there is continuing dialogue, and we hope that Than Shwe will see fit not only to meet Aung San Suu

[Mr. Ivan Lewis]

Kyi, but seriously to engage with her on the changes that need to be made in Burma.

On the more general question of political prisoners, there are more than 2,000 political prisoners in Burma. Some individuals have been given sentences of up to 104 years in jail and have deliberately been moved to prisons in isolated parts of the country. As hon. Members have said—the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) put this most powerfully—we are talking about individuals and about the human cost of the abuses that the regime perpetrates every day, so let me give an example. Every month, the sister of one political prisoner travels three days each way by plane, road and boat to take food and supplies to her brother in a remote prison.

Through the UN and the EU, and in direct contacts with the regime, we continue to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. Furthermore—hon. Members asked about this—we pursue and highlight specific cases. To give a tangible example, the FCO has launched an online campaign that profiles different political prisoners each week. We are doing that in partnership with the Burmese Assistance Association for Political Prisoners and with Human Rights Watch.

Mr. Crabb: I welcome the developments that the Minister has just described, but can he point to any examples of the Burmese regime releasing any political prisoners at all following pressure from the UK, the EU or the United States?

Mr. Lewis: Frankly, no. The regime is still reluctant to do so, but we believe that pressure can work. Despite the trumped-up charges in Aung San Suu Kyi's bogus trial, the regime clearly took some note of the pressure applied by the international community once the verdict was passed, so we need to maintain that pressure.

I was about to refer to the specific example of a former political prisoner about whom our ambassador wrote in his *Guardian* blog last week. Incredibly, the judge told this prisoner—a lawyer by profession—that he must be guilty of at least one of the 90 charges against him and, without further ado, sentenced him to 10 years' hard labour. The judge then invited him to speak, but warned him that every sentence that he uttered would add five years to his jail term. That is a recent example of what takes place from a court in Burma.

Dr. Pugh: The Minister may have good reason for this omission, but he has not referred much to the idea of a United Nations commission of inquiry.

Mr. Lewis: I was coming next to crimes against humanity and the proposed commission of inquiry. As hon. Members have said, there is no doubt that appalling human rights abuses are committed daily in Burma. Political freedom is absent and dissent is brutally crushed. The treatment of Burma's ethnic groups is of particular concern. We will continue to use the UN human rights bodies to highlight those abuses. In recent weeks, the UK helped to secure a strong UN General Assembly resolution on human rights abuses in Burma.

The work of the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Burma is crucial in investigating reports of human rights abuses, and we have urged the Burmese authorities to grant him full access. Comments have been made about the UN special envoy to Burma, who now has a new role. All that I will say is that we hope that his replacement proves effective, can make a real difference and has credibility in his engagement with the regime. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire referred to the UN special representative on sexual violence in conflict. I hope that we get somebody of high esteem and status to fill that position. Britain is actively seeking to ensure that that happens, because this is an issue of growing concern around the world.

The UK position on the commission of inquiry is clear. We have sought to clarify the support for such an initiative in the Security Council, and it is clear that there is not sufficient support at the moment to achieve the consensus that would deliver the necessary resolution. For us to table a vote that would be defeated would be a propaganda victory par excellence for the Burmese regime. The reason why we are being cautious about the commission of inquiry is not that we do not believe that it is right in principle, but that we believe that tabling a resolution that was voted down would backfire considerably in realpolitik terms. I therefore ask hon. Members to consider the difficult position that we are in and to understand that we continue to engage with partners to see whether there will be any shift in the position.

Since the bogus trial of Aung San Suu Kyi, we have pushed strongly for the adoption of a comprehensive arms embargo against the Burmese regime. Our request for an embargo was made in a letter from the Prime Minister to the UN Secretary-General. We continue to believe that such an embargo would have a significant impact on the regime's behaviour, and we hope that the UN Security Council will give serious consideration to it in the near future.

This has been an excellent debate. It has sent a strong and clear message to the people of Burma and their representatives in this country that their plight will not be forgotten, that we will use the House to amplify criticism of the human rights abuses in Burma and that will do everything that we can across the parties to make a difference.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Order. I thank Members for their thoughtful and helpful contributions to the debate on Burma. I ask those who are not staying for the next debate to leave quietly. We now move to a debate on the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible.

King James Bible

11 am

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is a pleasure, Mr. Hancock, to speak under your chairmanship. I feel that I ought to begin with an expression of disappointment. On three separate occasions I have raised the matter of the 400th anniversary of the authorised or King James Bible with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The most recent occasion was in October. It was disappointing that the Department stated that it would not mark the anniversary. That is especially so because I believe that it runs contrary to the Department's remit.

Under the heading "What we do" the Department's website states:

"We encourage and help the tourism industry to improve what it has to offer for all our visitors and to promote a positive image abroad."

We have the opportunity to attract many thousands of visitors from the United States and elsewhere, yet there are no plans to take advantage of that. The website says that the Department "Sets arts policy" and that it seeks to

"Broaden access for all to a rich and varied artistic and cultural life".

Here we have the single greatest piece of literature in the English language—the highest peak of all English literature—yet the Department says that it will not mark the anniversary.

With reference to the historic environment, the Department's website states that it is responsible for the promotion of historic national treasures, including the royal palaces. One of those is Hampton Court, where, in 1604, King James called the Hampton Court conference, which commissioned the King James Bible. Surely during such a year as 2011, and in connection with such an anniversary, more could be made of Hampton Court; and surely the Department could help to highlight Hampton Court and its role in producing the King James Bible.

The Department's refusal to mark the anniversary is a failure fully to discharge its own remit. However, it is much more than that. I believe that it lets down the nation. I am therefore grateful to the powers that be that we are able to debate the matter today. Of course, the phrase "the powers that be" is part of our language and speech only because of the King James version of the Bible. That is one of the many reasons why the 400th anniversary is so important, and why it should be commemorated.

The King James Bible is the greatest and most influential piece of literature in the English language. Poet laureate Andrew Motion said of it:

"To read it is to feel simultaneously at home, a citizen of the world, and a traveller through eternity."

The great Winston Churchill noted that the scholars who produced it had forged an enduring link, literary and religious, between the English-speaking people of the world. David Crystal said that it

"did something that nobody else had done, or nothing else had done in the history of the language previously. Not even Shakespeare had managed to do as much…no other text in the history of the English language has done as much as the Bible to shape our modern idiom".

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. He illuminates a number of people who have paid outstanding tributes to the King James version. Does he not agree that Queen Victoria most famously said that it was the secret of England's greatness?

David Simpson: I agree with my hon. Friend about Her Majesty's words. This great country of ours has unfortunately moved away from many of those principles, but we certainly remember what she said.

Whenever we speak of putting words in someone's mouth, of seeing the writing on the wall or of casting the first stone we are quoting the King James Bible. When we speak of the salt of the earth or of the staff of life, we do likewise. When we speak of a thorn in the flesh or of being at our wits' end, we do the same. When we talk of an eye for an eye or of a lamb to the slaughter, it is because of the King James Bible.

When we talk of fighting the good fight or of going from strength to strength, it is because the King James Bible said it first. Whenever we mention babes and sucklings or the apple of our eye, we are merely repeating what has already been said in the King James Bible. When we say that someone is reaping what they sowed or that a leopard cannot change its spots, or we speak of the blind leading the blind, we are merely saying today what the King James Bible said first.

It is not only our literature and language that has been influenced by the King James Bible. It has had an extraordinary and beneficial influence upon political and constitutional affairs. It was the Bible of Milton and of the Protectorate; later, it was the Bible of the Glorious Revolution, which gave us a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. It was the Bible of Whitefield and the Wesleys that saved this realm from the brutality and blood of the French revolution. It was the Bible carried by the founding fathers of the United States that helped to forge that land and give the world that great democratic powerhouse.

The King James Bible has also had an immense influence for good in social affairs. Hospitals were built, orphanages established and charities created as a result of its influence. The hungry were fed, the sick nursed and the poor given shelter, as people responded to its call to act.

Beyond all that, however, and above every other consideration, we must return to what is the highest and greatest of all of the benefits that the King James Bible has brought to men. Yes, the hungry were fed; but far greater than that, so were hungry souls. Yes, the sick were nursed; but so, too, were the spiritually sick, bruised and wounded. Yes, the poor were given shelter; but so were the poor and broken in soul. Lives that lay in ruins were made whole, and souls that were held in bondage were set at liberty. That was the greatest legacy and gift to the world of the King James Bible.

I commend the work of the 2011 Trust and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field). I also congratulate the BBC on its assurance that this important anniversary will be marked right across its output. We now need the Government to signal that they will do all that they can to commemorate the anniversary.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on his eloquent speech in support of the need to

[Mr. Nigel Dodds]

commemorate this 400th anniversary. Last Thursday in business questions, the Opposition called on the Government to take some kind of commemorative action, so there is consensus across the board for the Government to do something on this important anniversary.

David Simpson: I agree, and it is imperative that the Government recognise both this great anniversary and the spiritual work of the King James Bible. I trust that we will get a favourable response from the Minister today.

11.10 am

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) in saying that it is a pleasure, Mr. Hancock, to serve under your chairmanship today. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate on such an important subject. We talk about a lot of things in the House of Commons and in Westminster Hall, but there is nothing more precious that we could speak about than the Scriptures of holy truth. The authorised or King James Bible has been used under God to change the world, and many, many lives throughout the world, and much more importantly, it has changed them for the better. Charles Dickens said:

"The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world."

George Washington said:

"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."

I wish that many other Governments would remember that as well.

Abraham Lincoln said:

"It is the best Book which God has given to man."

Napoleon said:

"The Bible is no mere book, but a Living Creature, with a power that conquers all that oppose it."

That is certainly a warning to everyone who opposes it.

In each case, the Bible that was referred to was the authorised or King James Bible. C. S. Lewis said that whenever we use words such as "beautiful", "long-suffering", "peacemaker" or "scapegoat", it is down to the influence of the King James Bible. However, it is not only in the words or the many phrases in our language, some of which my hon. Friend has already alluded to, that the force and influence of the King James Bible is felt, but in the very rhythm of our language—the very way that we breathe and pause, and rise and fall as we speak. Why do we speak of chariots rather than chargers, of swords rather than pikes, of trumpets rather than bugles? Why have such things become our form of speaking? If we researched the matter, I believe that we would find that it is the influence of the beautiful language of the King James Bible.

We simply cannot account for the history of this nation—its culture, society, literature, language, political institutions and laws—if we ignore the contribution of the King James Bible. This single volume towers above every other document that pertains to the United Kingdom, and dwarfs every other document relating to this House. However, those matters, important as they are and as worthy of commemoration and celebration as they are, are all secondary whenever we come to consider this book.

John Wesley said:

"I am a creature of a day. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God. I want to know one thing: the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book! At any price give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book."

Without apology, and as a Member of this House, I concur with every word that John Wesley said, and I say, "Give me that book! At any price give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book."

Just as we cannot properly consider or fully understand the history of these islands without taking account of the influence of the King James Bible, so we cannot properly consider or fully understand that influence without taking account of the divine mind behind the book, or of the reason why God bequeathed it to us. It was for not just its great literary value, though that value is priceless; its language, though its language is the grandest yet simplest form of speech in our tongue; its cultural richness, though it has inspired and enthused succeeding generations; and it was not just for good government, though its principles are just and pure. Although all those things are reason enough for the Government to commemorate this anniversary, there is one thing greater: this book lives. It has been burned, but there is not the smell of fire about it. It has been buried, but no man has ever kept it in the grave. It beats, throbs and pulsates with the very life of God. This book sets men free.

This may be an unusual debate for the House, and it is not often that I wish we remembered more frequently where we have come from and the very basis and heart of our democracy. However, this book takes the lowest, meanest, vilest and basest of men, and changes their lives completely. It changes them not only outwardly, but inwardly, utterly and everlastingly.

The Government should unashamedly shout from the rooftops that this 400th anniversary is something that the United Kingdom should proudly commemorate. They should not try to put it into the corner or speak of it silently. I urge the Minister to

"set her mind on things above"

and agree with my hon. Friend and many other hon. Members that we should mark this very, very special anniversary. It is my honour and privilege to support what my hon. Friend said.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Thank you, Dr. McCrea, for a very moving and interesting contribution.

11.17 am

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Margaret Hodge): I, too, welcome this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on securing the slot, and I also appreciate the passionate and heartfelt way in which both he and the hon. Member for South Antrim (Dr. McCrea) spoke about the matter. Although I do not share their belief, I share their view about the importance of the Bible as a vital part of our history. I hope that I can allay some of their concerns during my contribution.

I have just finished reading "Wolf Hall" by Hilary Mantel, which won the Booker prize this year. The story is set in the time of Henry VIII. There is quite a lot in the book about the story of the first printed

English translation of the New Testament by William Tyndale. That version was seen as complete heresy by the Church, particularly because Tyndale acted unilaterally and had not sought the permission of the Church authorities. I commend the book to hon. Members. People were burned at the stake for that particular version. Tyndale was burned at the stake and others were beheaded. People were burned and lost their lives simply for possessing the book. There have been a number of versions of the English Bible: the great Bible of 1539, which Henry VIII commissioned; the more controversial Geneva Bible, which was largely based on Tyndale's version but had many marginal notes that interpreted the text from a strict post-Reformation standpoint; the bishops' Bible of 1568; and the Douay-Rheims Bible of 1582. Therefore, we have quite a history in the evolution of the Bible that we have today.

It is worth remembering how that Bible was produced. There were 54 translators—a lot of people—who were divided into groups that took consecutive books. They were instructed to consult one another closely, to ensure that there would be the consistency of style that we now appreciate. They were also instructed not to take too much from the Geneva version, which was seen as more controversial. They were told not to be opinionated in the notes that they made. All that they were to do was purely to clarify the meanings of the Greek and Hebrew terms. Hon. Members have quoted many comments on the King James Bible today. The one that I like is the description of it as

"the noblest monument of English prose".

I think that anyone who reads it feels that it is so. Biblical phrases that might occur to politicians reflecting on the expenses scandal might include

"the fat of the land",

or

"how are the mighty fallen!"

However, I prefer to think that "all things must pass". Now, at Christmas, let us

"eat, drink, and be merry."

There is something we can all take from the Bible.

It is hugely important to make the most of celebrations and commemorations of our history, whether of the Bible or other things, so I am slightly bemused by the impression that the hon. Member for Upper Bann gained of the Government's attitude. Such occasions are fantastically important in gaining a shared understanding of the past, which helps us to build a stronger common purpose for the present and the future, and therefore helps to sustain community cohesion, which is important in the hon. Gentleman's community and throughout Great Britain. In my time in my present post I have sought out such dates of commemoration and celebration, because they become important hooks for shared understanding of the past and our history; they are important for building the shared values that we want and that make Britain such an open and tolerant society.

Perhaps I can draw to hon. Members' attention several occasions on which we have worked hard to use celebrations and commemorations in that way. A couple of years ago, the Government put a lot of effort into events on the abolition of the slave trade. We had to think about some quite difficult issues in our past, but that helped to open up an understanding that tackled some of the discrimination in society today and helped us to build values for the future. Before my year off on compassionate leave, I was involved in working towards the Darwin bicentenary celebrations. I do not know how the hon. Gentlemen feel about that, but it was an important occasion and was fantastically successful. Darwin has been everywhere this year.

Dr. McCrea: While it is very important to talk about the other celebrations, what we want to know is what the Government will do to celebrate the great event of the 400th anniversary of the King James version of the scriptures. That is the nub of the issue.

Margaret Hodge: I am going to come to that, but I wanted to put the Bible celebrations into context among other occasions. I just wanted to mention, also, that a lot has been happening this year in connection with the accession of Henry VIII.

The Government do not themselves run the events for commemorations—and that particularly applies to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which is a tiny Department, most of whose money goes out to various agencies and funded organisations, which work with us but independently of us. That is important in the artistic and cultural world. We do not run events, but facilitate them. The Department tries to make the appropriate links and bring about appropriate working together, to ensure that things are properly commemorated. We are doing that for the Bible anniversary.

The 2011 Trust, which the hon. Member for Upper Bann mentioned, is very important. Just as we did not do the work on the Darwin commemoration, which was mainly done by the Natural History museum—I know that Darwin may be a bit contentious—so the 2011 Trust will take the leading role, supported by the Government, for all the purposes that I have outlined. We are not standing back. The trust is pulling together events, publications and literature to celebrate the impact of the Bible on our history and language, in this country in particular, and throughout the English-speaking world. I am interested in its suggestions on commissioning new music and literature and encouraging study days in cities along James's route from Scotland to London, and its plans to develop educational projects in schools, publish new texts and support exhibitions in London and around the country where the translations were made.

Equally, the British Library—an institution that we fund and sponsor—is making plans for one of the two copies of the King James Bible that it holds to be a star item in a forthcoming exhibition called "The Making of the English", which will, we hope, be launched in November 2010 and run to April 2011. It will explore the English language and its national and international diversity. Iconic collection items will be set alongside everyday texts, to show the many social, cultural and historical strands from which our language is woven. The King James Bible will be featured alongside other important treasures, such as "Beowulf", Shakespeare's folios, Johnson's dictionary, Austen manuscripts, Scott's diaries and recordings of speeches by Pankhurst, Churchill and Gandhi. I have been privileged, as a Minister, to see and listen to some of those exhibits. The exhibition will be very exciting, and will also display hand-written letters, recipes, posters, lists of slang, trading records, adverts, children's books, dialect recordings, text messages and web pages.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Are those exhibits to be shown all over the United Kingdom, or just in London?

Margaret Hodge: The hon. Gentleman is right to bring that up. The exhibition is to be in the British Library; but the British Library excels at digitising many of its collections and exhibitions, and I shall take the hon. Gentleman's point, and see what plans there are for digitisation of that exhibition. The British Library also intends to run some public events.

There is also a role for the BBC, which is sponsored by my Department and funded from the licence fee. It will showcase the King James Bible on television, radio and online, to mark the 400th anniversary. A cornerstone of its programming will be a brand new documentary on BBC 2 in 2011.

David Simpson: I thank the Minister for the information that she has given today, which is a breath of fresh air; we appreciate it. I know that BBC Northern Ireland has said it will commemorate the anniversary. Will that happen on the mainland as well?

Margaret Hodge: Yes. I am told that it will be an hour-long documentary, which will be presented by Lord Melvyn Bragg. It will explore the King James Bible as a remarkable work of faith and a historic piece of literature that has shaped our language, history and culture. I hope that that echoes some of the aspirations expressed by hon. Members. The documentary will also consider the Bible's extraordinary legacy and how, as it spread to the new world and the colonies, it helped to shape the world.

I hope that I have given hon. Members some comfort, but if they have other ideas, they are welcome to let us know. The fact that Government do not front something does not mean that we do not work to support it. I share with the hon. Gentlemen the understanding of the importance of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, and I hope that it will help us to build the community cohesion that we all want throughout Britain.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

National DNA Database

[Mr. Mike Hancock *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am very grateful indeed to have the opportunity to debate the issue of the national DNA database in this House of Commons. One of the reasons I am so grateful is that I will be contending that although the project has extraordinary implications—both for criminal justice, privacy and science—it has never been subject to a proper parliamentary debate.

The DNA database is an extraordinary innovation, which has emerged sideways and incrementally, without the full glare of parliamentary scrutiny, yet we have the biggest DNA database per head of population in the world. It is extraordinary that a project with such ramifications has not had the parliamentary scrutiny that it deserves, although an excellent report that touched on the issue was published by the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which is under the distinguished chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz). I hope that we will be hearing from my distinguished colleague later in the debate.

The police do an extraordinarily difficult job. Public fear of crime has never been higher and all of us, as elected representatives, must take seriously public fears of crime and the rise in some sorts of crime, such as violent or sexual crime, particularly in many of our big cities. No one feels more strongly about the matter than I do, because I represent Hackney in the east end of London, where, sadly, we do see such crimes.

Of course, if somebody is proven guilty in a court of law, no one objects to their DNA being kept in principle. The issue is the indiscriminate collection of innocent people's DNA. I spell that out right at the beginning because, sadly, when Ministers talk about the DNA database, they tend to merge and elide innocent and guilty people. It is almost as if the Government have a third category: rather than someone being wholly innocent, they might be not really innocent. As a Parliament, we must stand firm on one of the oldest British traditions: innocent until proven guilty.

Having spoken about the importance of what the police do and our support for the police, the problem with indiscriminately collecting the DNA of innocent people is the very serious possibility that that will undermine the community's confidence in the police and harm community and police relations. The Home Affairs Committee pointed to that in its report on this and related matters.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Is the situation not even worse, as some people in the community think that the police are making arrests when they would not do so otherwise, in order to collect DNA from people who will almost certainly be proven innocent?

Ms Abbott: That is a very important point. It is alarming if innocent people are being harassed and arrested when, at the end of the day, the police do not think that a successful prosecution can be brought and the purpose is merely to increase the size of the

DNA database. I will touch on some of the cases I have dealt with in which it was very clear that there was no possibility of arrest, but the police refused to release the DNA.

Of course, when talking about the indiscriminate collection of DNA, one must make the point that 77 per cent. of young black men aged 16 to 35 are on the database. As somebody who has been in politics—political activity—for more years than I care to remember, and who has campaigned against the unfair use of stop and search, I believe that we cannot pass over that subject. Even though it might seem like a useful administrative procedure for stopping young black boys willy-nilly to get their DNA, people have a highly developed sense of fairness, and if they think they are being stopped and searched unfairly, or that their DNA is being taken unfairly and there is no possibility of a successful prosecution, it cannot help confidence in the police generally or police-community relations.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on initiating this important debate. Does she consider that profiling is acceptable under any circumstances?

Ms Abbott: If profiling means that someone will make assumptions about a person's criminality or the sort of crime they might be about to commit or that they have committed on the basis of their skin colour, no. There is such a thing as scientific profiling, but the broad-brush profiling whereby a black teenage boy will be stopped in an Oxford street store as they go through the door, which has happened to my friends' children and to my son, does not help anyone and does not help to solve crime.

Let me just give a brief overview of the introduction of the DNA database to this country, because it is so much a part of criminal justice that many people do not know how relatively recently it was introduced. During the early 1980s, Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys was working on a scientific basis for DNA fingerprinting. Ten years later, the DNA database was set up based on DNA fingerprinting technology that was invented by Professor Jeffreys. Since the beginning in 1995—not even 20 years ago—more than 5 million DNA profiles have been collected and are currently being kept. Prior to 2001, DNA that was collected from individuals who were arrested was destroyed on acquittal. However, in May 2001, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 was amended to permit DNA to be kept on the database—it did not mandate that DNA be kept on the database. The difference between something being permitted and being mandated is a point to which I will return, because I think that the police have got confused between the two issues.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentioned the 5 million figure. Some 800,000 of those live in the midlands. At an indie band concert at The Oak in Burntwood, Staffordshire just 2 weeks ago, the band were wrongfully arrested. Police helicopters, dogs and a whole panoply of things were used, the band were taken into custody for having a gun—so a CCTV officer said—and their DNA was taken. However, under pressure from the media and the general public, Staffordshire police promised to delete that DNA and remove it from the database. There is inconsistency here, because the Government say that they will remove DNA from the database after six years, but local police forces will remove it rather earlier when they are under pressure.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. My argument is not that there should not be a database, or even that, under certain specific circumstances, the DNA of innocent people should not be kept. The problem is the chaos and the lack of a system. The people to whom my hon. Friend referred got their DNA removed almost immediately. I am working with completely innocent people who have waited years and years to get their DNA removed because, as I say, the Metropolitan police seem to labour under the idea that keeping such DNA is mandatory rather than being a matter of their discretion.

Bob Spink: In fact, there is more than confusion about the matter. The Government cannot rely on the fact that chief constables may at their discretion remove innocent people's DNA, because some chief constables have a different policy from others. In Essex, I have not been able to get a single innocent person's DNA removed from the database. That is unfair, discriminatory and arbitrary. The Government cannot hide behind the discretion of chief constables; they must act to resolve the problem.

Ms Abbott: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. We have an arbitrary, discriminatory system. Yet, Ministers—later in my remarks I shall quote from letters I have received from Ministers—seek to hide behind the discretion of chief constables. The Government have to intervene, and there must be a proper framework.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I also congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate. Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), Members have pressed Ministers—not necessarily to interfere with the discretion, but at the very least to issue guidance. It is possible for Ministers to issue guidance and for Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary, Denis O'Connor, to say to chief constables, "When people write in, at the very least write back," because one of the problems is that they just do not reply. If we get that customer service sorted out, it could actually improve the system.

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend is, as ever, both a philosopher and intensely practical. If the service offered to people to try to remove their DNA from a database was more efficient and less arbitrary, and if there were guidelines, much of the unhappiness would be removed.

Some people get their DNA removed from a database in weeks or months; some people wait years and are still waiting to have their DNA removed at the whim, in a way, of different police forces. That cannot be fair, it is not regarded as fair and it feeds a distrust of the whole system. That is unfortunate, because a database of guilty people and perhaps some innocent people, whose DNA would only be collected under very specific conditions, serves an important purpose in fighting crime.

I referred earlier to legislation in 2001 to amend the Police and Criminal Evidence Act. That amendment permitted DNA to be kept on the database. However,

[Ms Abbott]

even when the issue was discussed in the House during debates on that legislation, many Members felt that not enough time had been given to scrutinise it, which, sadly, is not an uncommon occurrence.

In 2004, PACE was amended again, to enable the police to take the fingerprints and DNA of anyone aged 10 or over who is arrested for a recordable offence. Later, the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 made all offences arrestable, which had the side effect of vastly increasing the number of people who could go on a DNA database automatically.

Therefore, the database has grown neither through an act of will of Parliament nor through a coherent discussion about the guidelines, the purpose and the underlying principles—how big it should be, the procedures involved and people's rights in relation to having their DNA kept by the police. Instead, it has grown incrementally as a result of permissive legislation that was slipped into big, portmanteau criminal justice Bills that were never properly debated in the House at any stage. That is not a satisfactory way to set up the largest DNA database in the world, with so many implications for our civil liberties.

David Taylor: It is possible that the Minister, who is in many ways a very able and sensitive man, will say in his response to the debate that he is concerned to hear what my hon. Friend is saying, but that last year alone almost 20,000 crimes were solved using a DNA match, including 83 killings and 184 rapes, and that the retention of the DNA of innocent people on the database is just an unfortunate and unavoidable cost that must be borne by those people. Would my hon. Friend say that that is sufficient reason?

Ms Abbott: As always, my hon. Friend displays both his perception and his mastery of the figures. Yes, of course, the Minister will throw at us figures for crimes that have been solved by the use of the DNA database. I conceded that point—that DNA is used to solve crimes—at the beginning of my remarks. However, the question is how many of those crimes were solved by the DNA of innocent people having been kept? Furthermore, if we restricted the collection of DNA from innocent people to certain specific categories of violent and sexual crime, could we not achieve the same results without taking DNA willy-nilly from children under 16 or from people for whom there is no chance of prosecution? Also, I was going to return to Sir Alec Jeffreys, the father of DNA—

Keith Vaz: He is from Leicester.

Ms Abbott: Indeed, he is from Leicester.

Dr. Murrison: The hon. Lady is being extremely generous in giving way and taking interventions. I think that she has probably hit the nail on the head, because surely the problem is that we do not have an adequate scientific basis on which to make such judgments. The fact that in November the Home Secretary had to effect something of a U-turn on DNA suggests that he does not have that evidence either. We have no way of judging whether the Scottish system, which is a far more liberal system than the one in England, is better or worse than the English system, which we are debating today. So, does she not agree that we need to have the evidence base before we start making policy? Unfortunately, we seem to have got it the wrong way round.

Ms Abbott: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Of course that is the problem. There is very little evidential basis for what the Government are doing. Indeed, I would like to quote Sir Alec Jeffreys, the father of the DNA database, who might be supposed to know more about the science and the statistics of DNA than most people. He entirely dismisses the Home Office argument that keeping the genetic details of everyone, even those acquitted of a crime, helps to solve other crimes. On this issue, he said:

"If you just dumped a few hundred thousand people at random on to the database you'd get the same effect."

I have had meetings with the Metropolitan police and the people in charge of their database and they admit that they have not done the research to demonstrate a real benefit arising from our system, which is indiscriminate, as opposed to the system that exists in other parts of the British isles.

As has been pointed out already, England, Wales and Northern Ireland are alone in Europe in retaining DNA indefinitely from people of any age for any offence. That is why, as I said earlier, we have the biggest database compared with population size in the world.

As I have said, among the problems with the DNA database is the lack of proper debate and thought about it, the fact that it is arbitrary and the fact that it can be seen as discriminatory. The issue has been raised with me in the past, so this year I have been working with Liberty on a project that tries to help innocent young people who have had their DNA taken and kept by the police to get it taken off the database. That speaks to the arbitrary nature of the decisions that are being made in the police force.

For instance, we are trying to help a young man of 21 with serious learning disability and autism. Prior to his arrest, he had no previous arrests, convictions or cautions. However, he is autistic and has a fascination with trains and women's shoes. Occasionally, he asks women if he can clean their shoes. On one occasion, the woman he asked consented, but then she thought that he touched the lower part of her leg. He was arrested on suspicion of sexual assault, and was photographed and had his DNA and prints taken. Finally, he was interviewed in the company of his father and it was established that he was non-threatening and autistic. No charges were pressed and yet his DNA has been retained indefinitely.

A teenage boy was in Finsbury park with his friends on bicycles. A robbery took place elsewhere in the park, which is huge. The police obviously swept the park and arrested every young black man in it. The teenage boy was arrested and held in a police station for eight hours. Eventually, he was released without charge and the police confirmed that no further action would be taken against him. Again, he had no previous arrests, convictions or cautions, but the police are holding his DNA indefinitely and resisting any attempts to remove it from the database.

A young girl of 17 was shopping with her mum, who was arrested on suspicion of shoplifting. The girl was told that nothing would happen to her, but she was taken to the police station along with her mum and had her DNA taken, which the Met is sitting on indefinitely.

A teenage boy in Greenwich park was having a water-fight. In another part of Greenwich park—it, too, is a big park—an assault took place. The police swept the park for all young black men. They came to the boy's house, arrested him, took him to a police station and took his DNA. No further action was taken by the police, but they are still sitting on his DNA indefinitely.

A young girl of 16 was a victim of bullying at school. She and the child bullying her got into a fight and the police were called to the school. The police arrested them both and took DNA from them both. No charges were pressed—it was a schoolgirl fight—but the DNA is being held indefinitely.

A young woman of 25, who had no previous arrests, convictions or cautions, went to Primark to return some goods that she had got the day before. She was wearing—well, there are Members here who obviously shop at Gucci, rather than Primark, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East who would not be seen in Primark.

Keith Vaz: Harrods.

Ms Abbott: Harrods—exactly. *[Laughter.]* The girl went to Primark to return some goods that she had bought the day before. She was also wearing a Primark sweater that she had bought the day before, but she took the precaution of taking the receipt with her to the shop. None the less, she was arrested on suspicion of stealing the sweater that she was wearing. Nobody was interested in the receipt that she had for it, so she was arrested. She was questioned for nine hours and released. The police are holding her DNA indefinitely.

The final case that I will refer to involves two young girls aged 17 and 14. They were at a party in south London and then, at 9 o'clock, they were in the back of a car on their way home. It was a party at Easter, as they were on their Easter holidays from school. The car was stopped by the police and there was a scuffle between the police and the driver. The driver, another boy who was in the front of the car and the two girls were taken to Lewisham police station. Both the young girls, who, as I say, were 17 and 14, were arrested, handcuffed and kept in a cell for hours while they had their DNA taken. No charges were ever brought against the young men. So, in April 2006 I wrote to Chief Superintendent Archie Torrance, the borough commander of Lewisham police, about this incident. It took him a month to write back to me and say that the arresting officers were actually part of the territorial support group and I would have to write to that group.

A few weeks later, I heard from a representative of the territorial support group, who said that he was looking into the matter, and in a few more weeks I got a response. Although the response did not say so explicitly, it gave the clear impression that the keeping of DNA after an arrest for a recordable offence was mandatory and that territorial support had no discretion in the matter, so I wrote to my right hon. Friend and colleague the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), the then Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety. He wrote back to me saying that it was a matter for the discretion of the police.

The territorial support group representative then wrote to me again. He claimed that he had never told anyone that it was mandatory, but made no offer to remove the 14-year-old's DNA from the database. I am not talking about the two boys in the front of the car, although they were innocent; I am talking about a 14-year-old girl who was getting a lift home. She had no previous convictions. Her mum is a sculptor and her dad is an architect. The police refused to remove the DNA from their database.

Finally, in June, I got a reply from the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Joan Ryan):

"Chief Constables retain the discretion to decide whether or not fingerprints and samples will be retained in individual cases although it would be the norm to do so. The matter of discretion is an operational one for the police force involved and not one into which the Home Secretary has any input."

Ministers are hiding behind chief constables, even though they have not issued guidelines to chief constables, there has never been a debate and there is no procedure or process. A 14-year-old girl with no previous convictions was kept in a cell when she should not have been, and the police do not want to let go of her DNA.

Dr. Murrison: I am fascinated to know what the discretion is based on. Do the police feel that the person might have been involved in a crime before and that they need to check up on them, or are they making a value judgment about the likelihood that the person will commit a crime in future? It seems odd that there is no guidance at all. Surely it is a matter for the Home Secretary. If it is his intention to have a database against which suspected future felons can be checked, that is surely a matter for the Home Office and not for individual police forces and chief constables acting on discretion, which does not appear to be based on anything.

Ms Abbott: It is based on nothing, and it leads to the sort of inequality between police forces that other hon. Members have referred to.

David Taylor: Is there not a risk, or even a suspicion, that innocent people whose DNA is destroyed or withdrawn are likely to be the offspring of local worthies, but that the DNA of someone from the wrong side of the tracks will stay on the database for a long time?

Ms Abbott: Precisely, unless there are guidelines, transparency and accountability. Chief constables are doing it at their whim and pleasure.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North completed her letter to me by saying that the Home Secretary has no input into such decisions and that:

"Your constituents should therefore contact the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service and ask if he considers there are sufficiently exceptional circumstances in this case to merit the removal of the DNA profile from the database."

What could be more exceptional than a 14-year-old girl with no previous convictions who was arrested as part of an incident where no charges were pressed? At that point, two years ago, Ministers seemed to be saying that the onus was on innocent people to show why their DNA should be withdrawn and that that would be the exception rather than the rule, however innocent they were.

Keith Vaz: As a result of what my hon. Friend has done on the issue—she probably does not know this, as it has not been announced—the Select Committee on Home Affairs decided on Tuesday to hold an inquiry into the DNA database. It would be extremely helpful if she could arrange for some of the people whom she has mentioned with such eloquence to give evidence to the inquiry.

Ms Abbott: I would be glad to do so. I am pleased to hear that the Select Committee is going to take that action.

In July, the mother of the two girls got a letter from Detective Inspector Tracy Sherman of the Met. It simply rehearsed the legal position under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, saying that the police had the power to do what they did:

"In this case the arrest was lawful and therefore the power to take and retain DNA exists."

In other words, "We can do it legally, we are doing it and there's nothing you can do about it." That was the police position. The onus is on an innocent 14-year-old girl to show that the circumstances merit removal.

Since then, the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), who was also involved with the family, has written to the Metropolitan police. Earlier this year, I met Gary Pugh, the director of forensic services at the Met, to raise the case again. He wrote to me to say that, in the end, the two girls' DNA was removed from the database in 2008. It took two years and two MPs. The police tried to hide behind Ministers, and Ministers tried to hide behind chief constables. It was a thoroughly unedifying incident, and it is one of the things that drew me into the issue.

Most importantly, in December 2008, the European Court of Human Rights ruled against the indefinite retention on the database of the DNA of people who have not been convicted of a crime. I will quote some of what the Court said, because it is important. The Court said that it was

"struck by the blanket and indiscriminate nature of the power of retention in England and Wales",

that the retention of the DNA in question

"fails to strike a fair balance between the competing public and private interests"

and that the UK Government had

"overstepped any acceptable margin of appreciation in this regard".

The Court further ruled that

"the retention at issue constitutes a disproportionate interference with the applicants' right to respect for private life and cannot be regarded as necessary in a democratic society."

Even if some Home Office Ministers are anti-European, one might expect that such a ruling would bring a blush to their cheeks. Not at all. They waited five months before consulting on their proposals. When they went out to consultation, they got 503 responses from lawyers, police organisations, children's rights groups and so on. It is interesting that their proposals after consultation are almost exactly the same as the proposals that they put out to consultation in the first place. In other words, Members will be shocked to hear, they took no notice of the consultation. That is rare and unusual where Governments are concerned, so I do not want to shock younger Members unduly.

The Home Secretary's written statement in November setting out the finalised Home Office plans in response to the ECHR ruling took into account none of the opinions in the consultation. I will not go through the Government's plans, but I will make one point. The original consultation document contained plans to retain the DNA of under-18s who were arrested but not convicted. We have not had any more information, so I would like to hear what will be done about that group of people.

In conclusion, I draw Parliament's attention to the views of Sir Alec Jeffreys, the father of DNA. One would expect the father of the science to be in favour of a vast database, of collecting as much DNA from as many people as possible and of the fact that we have the biggest DNA database relative to population in the world. However, he says:

"My view is very clear that if you have been convicted of a crime then you owe it to society to be retained on that database for catching in the future should you reoffend. But the retention of entirely innocent people is a whole different issue. There is a sort of presumption here that if they haven't committed any crime now, then they will in the future."

That is this Government's midway point: not quite innocent and not quite guilty.

David Taylor: Not proven.

Ms Abbott: Which is not a verdict in the British system. Sir Alec went on to say:

"I have never seen any argument in favour of England, Wales and Northern Ireland being the only countries in the world to retain the DNA of entirely innocent people. There are serious issues of discrimination and stigmatisation of branches of society that are over-represented on the database."

That is the man who invented the science. He also said that there was a possibility of miscarriages of justice:

"Let's suggest you have two samples that get swapped, and I stress that the likelihood is very low, but given the huge amount of case work one has to be mindful of the fact that there is not a zero probability, then you may get an error. You may have the wrong profile and come up with the wrong suspect."

If the ECHR judgment did not bring a blush to Ministers' cheeks, Sir Alec Jeffrey's reply to the Government's response ought to. He said:

"It seems to be about as minimal a response to the European court of human rights judgment as one could conceive. There is a presumption not of innocence but of future guilt here…which I find very disturbing indeed.

I do not see this as balanced and proportionate. It still places England, Wales and Northern Ireland as the only jurisdictions in the world, to my knowledge, to retain such large amounts of innocent DNA information."

He dismissed the prediction that if the proposals were followed, 4,500 fewer crimes would be detected, which we will no doubt hear from the Minister. He said:

"There is an unspoken assumption in here that these thousands of crimes that will not be detected by not having the DNA will remain undetected and that simply isn't the case. A significant number of these will be detectable through conventional police work".

We have the biggest DNA database in relation to population in the world. It is an extraordinary innovation in science, which has consequences for personal intrusion and civil liberties. It is condemned by the man who invented the science, even though one might imagine that he would support the hoovering up of DNA willy-nilly.

A European Court judgment has struck down the basis of the Government's collection of DNA. I put it to the Government that a more serious debate on this issue is long overdue.

I repeat that no one is against collecting the DNA of guilty people; no one is even saying that there are not limited circumstances in which we should keep the DNA of people who have not been convicted, but who have been accused of certain crimes. However, there is no scientific research basis for keeping the DNA of innocent people in the way that the Government have done or the way that they propose to do. That has detrimental effects on community relations.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I, too, commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I have listened carefully to her powerful argument. For some time, she has alluded to Ministers hiding behind the discretionary power of chief constables and to the lack of guidance issued by Ministers. Is she aware of the representative body of chief police officers having requested such guidance from Ministers? I am not. Does she know whether such guidance would be welcomed?

Ms Abbott: I am not aware that chief constables have requested guidance. However, people not requesting guidance has not stopped the Government from issuing it in the past, whether to official organisations or members of the public. The Government are free with their guidance when it suits them. Chief constables not asking for guidance is not a reason for the Government not to provide it.

In closing, at the least there should be proper guidelines. The Government should rethink their response to the European Court of Human Rights ruling because everybody, including the man who invented the science, thinks that it is wholly inadequate. The Government need a much more balanced approach to the keeping of innocent people's DNA. They are building up a huge database with no evidentiary basis to show that doing so will help to solve crimes, yet they are doing it in the name of being tough on crime and to outdo other parties. They are not considering the implications for civil liberties and community relations or issues of fairness in public policy. I urge the Government to reconsider before it is too late and to allow Parliament a full debate on the issue.

3.4 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): The Minister, the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) and I have discussed the DNA database at least five times over the past year, beginning with our consideration of the Policing and Crime Bill at the beginning of the year.

I will summarise the key points, which the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) ably encapsulated. We have the largest DNA database in the world. Approximately a fifth of the people on it—about 1 million people—are innocent, which means that they were never convicted or charged. Many people think that to keep such a large database with so many innocent people on it is simply wrong. The database includes disproportionate numbers of groups such as ethnic minorities, and we have heard examples to illustrate that. It also contains a disproportionate number of children and young people, and people with mental health conditions.

The database criminalises many young people for behaviour that would not have been considered criminal in the past. We have raised cases such as the case of the two children building a den up a cherry tree in debates this year in various Committees. As has been reported in the national press, some police forces, such as Derbyshire, are experimenting with restorative justice, whereby police are urged not to take children through a criminal process—including taking DNA—and give them a criminal record in such circumstances, but to get them to apologise to the person involved, restore the damage if possible or make it up in some other way. Although a few forces are experimenting with that provision, it does not alter the fact that over 12 years, there has been an increasing criminalisation of young people for things that would not have been crimes when we were children.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, the huge DNA database has been accumulated not following a major parliamentary or national debate, but incrementally, without any formal discussion, recognition or acceptance. Over the years, an increasing number of people have expressed concern about that. Most recently, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that it contravenes human rights in various ways. The Government's first response to that ruling came at the Committee stage of the Policing and Crime Bill in February. At the last minute, after six weeks of intensive and productive debate, they took a blank-cheque approach, saying that if we gave them permission to produce regulations, they would do something about the ruling, but that they would not tell us what the solution was until after the Bill had completed its passage through Parliament. Of course, we all said that that was unacceptable. A few weeks ago, on the last day of the last Session, the Government withdrew that proposal and instead a new Bill was proposed in the Queen's Speech.

As has been said, nobody doubts that DNA evidence is a major scientific step forward. It provides valuable assistance in the convictions of some criminals and in proving some people innocent. As the Secretary of State pointed out in the Queen's Speech debate in the House, people who have been in prison for years have been cleared as a result of DNA evidence. Despite its value, we should not overestimate the role of DNA. In a parliamentary answer on 21 October, the Minister stated that in 2008-09, a DNA match had been available in only 0.68 per cent. of cases. That is less than 1 per cent.—it is closer to 0.5 per cent. than to 1 per cent. He also stated:

"It is also important to note that the detections are achieved through integrated criminal investigation, not through DNA alone."—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2009; Vol. 497, c. 1538W.]

That means that a percentage of cases even smaller than 0.68 per cent. were solved by DNA alone, because other criminal investigations were under way. An even smaller percentage of cases are solved as a result of people being on the database because they were innocent, rather than being convicted of a crime. We do not know quite how much smaller than 0.68 per cent. that small percentage is, because a lot of the Government's policy seems to be based on flimsy research and assertion, rather than on detailed evidence. One example of the problem comes from the Jill Dando Institute, on whose work the Government based their initial policy of retaining innocent people's DNA for six or 12 years, depending

[Paul Holmes]

on the category of crime for which they were originally questioned, but for which they were never charged or convicted. The institute later said that its research should not have been used, because it was unfinished. Gloria Laycock, the director of the institute, said that Government policy

"should be based on proper analysis and evidence and we did our best to try and produce some in a terribly tiny timeframe, using data we were not given direct access to...That was probably a mistake with hindsight, we should have just said 'you might as well just stick your finger in the air and think of a number.'"

If that is the research on which Government policy is based, we really have to worry.

As regards the people on the database, we also have the evidence of former chief constable Tony Lake, who used to head the national DNA database board. He said that one of the key problems with policy on this issue is the lack of reliable data on the number and types of crimes that have been directly solved by retaining the DNA profiles of innocent people. He said:

"It is not a straightforward issue because a lot of people who commit the most serious crime and become serial offenders don't start their criminal careers with serious offences...This is an immensely complex issue which is why I do think there needs to be a very thorough study on offending patterns."

As we heard in the opening speech, however, the Government seem not to have accumulated this huge database on the basis of detailed research and evidence, and they have rushed to make off-the-cuff responses to the European Court ruling, blank-cheque proposals in the Policing and Crime Bill and now their new proposals, which are essentially a rehash of old ones. There is still no serious systematic research to underpin their policy, which, to many people, is extremely illiberal and a contravention of human rights, as well as criminalising people who should not be criminalised and leading to all sorts of other issues. There is therefore a lack of research on exactly how many cases are solved by DNA alone, and there is a lack of evidence to underpin the Government's proposals on retaining the DNA of innocent people. That must cast very serious doubt on the Government's approach to this issue.

We have heard of individual cases from the constituency of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington in London, but we all have similar examples from our own constituencies. One constituent of mine was assaulted by a group of youths in Derby. There were lots of witnesses, but he was also arrested. The other youths made counter-charges, even though five of them attacked him. The case was going to court, but in April, my constituent finally heard that it had been dropped. He immediately contacted the police and then the chief constable. He says:

"I requested return of my DNA within 24 hours of being told by the police (April this year) that the case had been dropped."

He goes on to say that the PC

"told me that it was retained. I then pointed out the 'Exceptional Circumstances' ruling"—

it is not really a ruling, but a procedure recommended by the Association of Chief Police Officers—

"and asked how to make an appeal under this procedure. She replied saying that she had forwarded my request to the Professional Standards Department, from whom I would hear shortly."

That was in April. On 13 November—months later—my constituent told me:

"I never heard a thing",

and we have heard exactly the same thing in other examples that we have been given. As we have heard, people write to the chief constable and their local police force, but they do not even receive an acknowledgement or a letter saying no—they just do not hear anything.

David Taylor: Just for clarification, I should say that in the case that I mentioned of the indie band The Thirst, the chief constable of Staffordshire, under significant pressure, promised the same weekend to remove the DNA from the database. What concerns many people, however, is the inconsistency of the approach.

Paul Holmes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification.

Last April, my constituent said, "Right, you've dropped the case. Can you take my DNA off the database?" He had had no answer by November. A few weeks previously, in early autumn, he says that he had again requested removal and that the PC had again said that she had forwarded his request to the professional standards department. Again, however, there was no further response. My constituent added—this was in evidence that he submitted to Liberty—

"It was after this that I got Paul Holmes to write on my behalf"

to the chief constable. However, we are still not much further forward a few weeks later, in December. My constituent went on to say that the professional standards department

"confirmed that my complaint had been 'recorded'—but have never responded regarding the request for the return of my DNA nor to give details of how to make a request under the 'Exceptional Circumstances'"

procedure.

The exceptional circumstances procedure recommended in ACPO guidelines includes all sorts of grounds on which a chief constable might agree to remove a DNA sample from the database. Those grounds include the fact that a false allegation was made; the subject was unlawfully or wrongly arrested or unlawfully cautioned; the caution was inappropriate; or the subject was unlawfully processed. However, most of those grounds do not touch on the possibility that the subject was actually innocent—that is not one of the reasons given for why the DNA might be removed from the database. As we have heard, however, there are lots of examples of chief constables making different interpretations. When the Secretary of State debated the issue in the Queen's Speech debate, however, he said that the practice of chief constables would not really change until the Crime and Security Bill had gone through the parliamentary process. Given that we have 70 parliamentary days before a general election must be held, that process is unlikely to reach a full conclusion.

There are therefore lots of problems with the database, including the way in which it has been accumulated, the huge percentage of innocent people on it, the difficulty that innocent people have in getting their DNA removed from it, the lack of clarification, guidance and procedures, the Government's stonewalling and the lack of a scientific base to underpin the Government's policies.

Why does all this matter? One argument that we hear is, "If you've nothing to fear, you've nothing to hide." One point that that I have raised several times, but which always gets rebutted, is that if we follow through the logic of the Government's wish to have the largest DNA database in the world—the database contains 1 million innocent people, as well as up to 5 million people with convictions of various kinds—the safest thing would be to record the DNA of everybody in the country. There are problems with such a scheme, such as its sheer size and cost, but that would be the logic of the Government's wish to have the biggest DNA database possible because the DNA might be useful in dealing with just over 0.5 per cent. of crimes in a given year.

Ms Abbott: The hon. Gentleman mentions an argument that we often hear—"If you're innocent, you've nothing to fear." One thing that people have to fear, however, is the number of mistakes on the DNA database. In 2007, the Home Office released figures showing that there were more than 500,000 faults or wrongly recorded names on the database. Furthermore, as I said earlier, as the database gets bigger, the issue of errors will become more important.

Paul Holmes: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. She is quite correct. One problem with creating a database of the current size, let alone a database for the whole population, is its cost and manageability. The bigger the database gets, however, the more chance there is that mistakes will occur. There is also more chance that that data will leak out. In that respect, we all know the record of large organisations—the Government's is well known, but other large organisations have similar issues. Recently, people in mobile phone companies were selling data from one company to another. In any large organisation with large amounts of sensitive data, there will be more chance of that data getting lost, being sold or being illegally passed on.

In November, in a report entitled "Nothing to Hide, Nothing to Fear?", the Human Genetics Commission said:

> "DNA captures an individual's very 'genetic soul'...the most intimate medical data an individual may possess."

It warned of the dangers of such data being collected in large amounts. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics has expressed strong concern that the database shifts the relationship between the citizen and the state to the extent that the state will treat all individuals as potential offenders, rather than as citizens of good will.

On all those grounds, which we have addressed several times this year, but which we will obviously continue to address, I urge the Minister to think again about the rehashed proposals in the Queen's Speech. I urge him to go back to a proper scientific evaluation of the issue, because former chief constable Tony Lake says that we do not have one, as does the Jill Dando Institute, even though the institute was prayed in aid to support Government policy earlier this year. I urge the Minister to start again.

3.19 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on securing the debate. I am only sorry that more hon. Members have not participated, because it is an extremely important debate in setting the framework for the retention of DNA, which is highly sensitive material.

We are talking about some fairly fundamental issues in our democracy: getting the right and proportionate balance; considerations such as people being innocent until proven guilty; the fact that, as the hon. Lady mentioned, the Government have yet to respond on the matter of the blanket, indiscriminate approach that has been adopted to date; and the fact that 12 months on from the extremely important judgment in S and Marper, we are no further forward. In that case, the court gave a very clear signal that the Government's current approach is unlawful, and it remains unlawful to this day.

The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington made some important points about the nature and impact of the Government's approach, and the fact that disproportionately more black boys are on the DNA database, in comparison with other groups represented in the country's population. That raises serious issues, including the disproportionate representation of young people generally on the database, and how the database has grown. We have had a sort of mission creep. The hon. Lady described the lack of guidelines for chief constables on removal of DNA from the database, and that point was well made.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I am sorry that I missed the first part of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms. Abbot).

The hon. Gentleman must be aware, as I am, that the retention of young people's DNA simply reflects the stop-and-search policies that mean DNA can often be taken, if the person is taken into the police station. Also, a lot of young people are, frankly, almost unaware that they have had their DNA taken, or that it is held in a record. Because of that, they have no idea how to get rid of it, either. It returns to haunt them, often many years later, when they were completely unaware that they had any record against them in the first place.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the consequences of having simply let the database grow without proper debate, a proper statutory framework, or proper consideration of whether we wanted, in the first place, to get to the position we are now in. It has simply happened, rather than our making any conscious decision that we wanted to end up where we are. I shall come on to some comments made in the S and Marper judgment about what the policy framework and intentions were.

Ms Abbott: On the number of young people, both black and white, whose DNA is on the database, is the hon. Gentleman surprised to know that young people in Hackney have, as young people do, turned the whole thing on its head, and that they now feel that having their DNA taken is a mark of being on the way to becoming a fully-fledged criminal? The problem is that that is just one of a series of signals that society is giving young people in some areas that they are almost doomed to be criminals. That cannot be right. We should be reinforcing the positive, rather than subjecting them to an arbitrary regime that gives them the feeling that they are stigmatised.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady makes a point about unintended consequences, and I do not intend to stray into the wider debate about youth offending and the prevention of crime. However, society must consider some of the messages that are being sent out and how, practically, we can break into generational issues and try to stop what we have described as the conveyor belt to crime.

As to how we have got where we are, the hon. Lady described that quite clearly in recounting her own experience. I was interested to read on her website about the clinic that she set up with Liberty to provide advice to young people whose DNA had been retained by the police. It threw up the issue of inconsistency and the lack of guidance and certainty for those young people—and, as we have heard this afternoon, for the police—about the appropriate course of action. I therefore hope that we shall continue the debate in the weeks ahead, when we reach the detailed consideration of the Crime and Security Bill announced in the Queen's Speech.

We will need a lot of detailed debate, and I hope that the hon. Lady will be permitted to sit as a member of the Public Bill Committee, to contribute her experience to the scrutiny. The issues that have been raised today are the very ones that we shall need to drill down into, in considering the detail of the Government's proposals. There has been a shift because of the S and Marper judgment, but I would argue that it has not gone far enough. In attempting to understand the Government's methodology and approach, we will have an interesting debate. In some ways we are starting that this afternoon, but it will continue. I hope that the continuing debate will be well supported and that hon. Members will participate so that we can get the important scrutiny and valid debate that we need in this place; so that we can get a fair, reasonable and proportionate balance between the interests of the state in preventing crime, and of the individual in terms of privacy and human rights; and so that what Parliament does to reflect the European Court judgment is appropriate.

It was interesting to hear the continuation of the debate that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) and I have been having with the Minister. This is possibly the fourth occasion when we have had the pleasure of debating the issues. It is important, because the issues are fundamental to the balance of the society we want to create. The Government and state approach, and the relationship of that to the individual, are starkly brought into focus by the issue of the retention of DNA. Nothing is much more personal than the retention of people's genetic make-up by the state.

I start in a position of consensus with the Government because I welcome the fact that they have at least acknowledged that the DNA itself—the base material—will be kept for only a limited period. I think that they have said it will be for six months. Therefore, what will be retained on the DNA database will be a profile comprising, effectively, lots of numbers that relate to the DNA that has been taken. At least the Government have accepted that the human material shall be retained only for a limited period. Then we get into the detail of retention of the profile, what the matching of a profile might mean, and whether the retention of that profile itself for the time suggested is appropriate.

The retention of cellular samples is particularly intrusive given the wealth of genetic and health information that they contain. The use of the technology must involve the right balance between the promotion of the wider public interest and public safety and the protection of important private life interests. That is obviously central to this afternoon's debate. As Professor Jonathan Montgomery, the chair of the Human Genetics Commission, notes:

> "DNA evidence plays a significant role in bringing criminals before the courts and securing convictions. But it is not clear how far holding DNA profiles on a central database improves police investigations. We have to strike a proper balance between identifying offenders and protecting privacy, including that of innocent people—we should not compromise that privacy without good reason."

That is a good description of the focus that is needed in the debate—on those principles that Professor Montgomery identified.

The UK, as the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington mentioned, has proportionately the largest DNA database in the world. We have approximately 4.3 million profiles. That equates to 10 per cent. of the population of England and Wales, if one breaks it down by the profiles that have been added by police forces in England and Wales. One might have thought that retaining all that data would result in a significant increase in the detection of crime—that, by virtue of the growth in DNA records and the amount of material held, there would be a growth in the number of cases solved, assuming that that is the driving factor. However, the number of DNA detections for 2008-09 is 17,607.

The Minister has argued in the past that the reduction in the number of DNA detections is simply a consequence of a reduction in crime. First, I do not accept that argument. Secondly, even if one did accept it, one would still need to explain why the proportion of crimes detected by DNA has fallen: the figure two years ago was 0.76 per cent., and in the past year it was 0.67 per cent. Similarly, the proportion of crimes detected in which a DNA match was available was 36.5 per cent. two years ago, and 32.4 per cent. last year. Therefore, I do not accept the argument that a reduction in crime. So, something is happening here.

I would be interested to know whether the Minister has looked at the situation in Scotland, which operates a different and much narrower system, but where DNA detections are higher than in England and Wales. Questions must be asked about the use of a blanket approach to detect and solve crime and provide safety, because the detection rate—I stand to be challenged on this—seems lower in England and Wales than it is in Scotland. That raises some interesting questions. I do not make that point in a directly partisan way, but if we are trying to use a more evidence-based approach, we need to understand why that system is more effective, as our sole purpose is to detect and solve crime.

I was interested to read the Human Genetics Commission's recent report, which noted:

> "There is insufficient evidence at present to be able to say what use holding DNA profiled from different people is—this evidence is urgently needed to support decisions about the scope of the database".

I looked at the approach the Government started with, prior to the S and Marper judgment, which obviously still pervades today. It was interesting to note in the

judgment that the Government's policy was described as not depending on innocence or guilt, which is clearly how we understand it.

In a further submission in the course of that case, the Government argued that the fingerprints and samples had been lawfully taken and that their retention is not related to the fact that the people involved were originally suspected of committing a crime,

"the sole reason for their retention being to increase the size and, therefore, the use of the database in identification of offenders in the future."

If there was a policy of simply growing the database for the sake of it, that is worrying, as we are starting to hear reports—I do not know how grounded they are—of police arresting people, allegedly for the purposes of collecting DNA.

I welcome the fact that the Government, following the S and Marper judgment, appear to have recognised that the Big Brother approach is unacceptable. As a result, we now have the proposals that were originally put forward in the consultation documents published in the summer, as has been mentioned. That was reflected in the Home Secretary's statement in November, as well as in the Crime and Security Bill, which will have further consideration by the House.

It is odd that we got to that position, because, as the hon. Member for Chesterfield rightly pointed out, we had, during the passage of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 in the previous Session, some heated debates about the fact that the Government originally simply wanted to give a blank cheque and to deal with the matter through statutory instrument and order-making power. That was utterly unacceptable, and I am pleased that they brought forward primary legislation to address the valid and serious concerns of many hon. Members' about the use of such powers on a matter with such substantive and significant implications for private life.

In his statement on 11 November, the Home Secretary said that, since the publication of the consultation document over the summer, the Home Office had

"sought to further the evidence base through additional research."—[*Official Report*, 11 November 2009; Vol. 499, c. 26WS.]

We have heard that the research published alongside the consultation document in the summer was not peer-reviewed, was premature and did not take the correct approach, and I think that the Home Office has accepted that that research did not provide the evidence base it sought to procure.

It would be interesting to hear what further analysis the Government have now undertaken, because I am aware of the document, "DNA retention policy: Re-arrest hazard rate analysis", which was published alongside the Home Secretary's statement. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what the preparation of that document involved. Is it an internal Home Office document, was there some external work conducted and, if so, who conducted it and was it peer-reviewed? We must know that so that we are not in the situation we were in before in relation to the previous published analysis. What robustness has been attached to the document before us?

The approach the Government have sought to take to justify the six-year period, I understand, is based on that analysis document. The approach they have taken is to try to match arrest rate to arrest rate and provide a graph for how that applies to the population in general. Some interesting points come out of the document published by the Home Office to support its proposals, because it has attached various caveats to the analysis that state that in measuring the graph, to try to support the justification, the lines are measured with some degree of uncertainty. The banding, therefore, has a high potential for error, which is reflected and represented in the document itself. The document states:

"However, it should be remembered that this is an estimated maximum which is based solely on a consideration of relative risks. Other considerations could result in an actual policy which is longer or shorter than six years— the evidence we present in this paper is not able to say what this final decision should be."

Therefore, in fairness, that document could not be said to be in any way conclusive. Indeed, it suggests that after three years, the sharp dissipation in the hazard curve starts to level off, which supports setting a limit at the three-year point. Interestingly, even when one burrows down into the detail of the evidence document the Home Office published alongside its proposals for a six-year period, one does not find the robustness of approach that might be presented as supporting the Home Office's case.

We have several questions on the proposals in the Crime and Security Bill, which will be debated by the House in greater detail at a later date. However, before I finish my speech, I have one question for the Minister on the advice and consideration that the Home Office has taken on the legality of the blanket, indiscriminate, six-year period, which would not take into account any specific crime. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has written a letter to the Council of Europe, stating of even the revised proposals:

"This fails to address the Committee's decision that 6 years for non-serious offences lacks the required level of proportionality. The Commission believes that treating adults in this category the same regardless of type of offence is too indiscriminate and lacks the required level of proportionality. It does not comply with Committee of Ministers Recommendations Rec(92)1."

It is important to put on the record what consideration the Government have given, even in introducing these proposals, to whether they are compliant with the terms of the European convention on human rights. Indeed, I believe that the Home Secretary's statement in November implied that there was some question about their compliance. He stated:

"Although the ECHR"—

the European Court of Human Rights—

"suggested that the seriousness of the alleged offence should be a factor in determining what length of retention was proportionate, the best available evidence indicates that the type of offence a person is first arrested for is not a good indicator of the seriousness of offence he might subsequently be arrested for or convicted of in future."—[*Official Report*, 11 November 2009; Vol. 499, c. 26WS.]

That statement was made by the Home Secretary.

We can, I am sure, have a detailed discussion about this in future, but it would be interesting to hear responses from the Minister on those specific points. My party takes a different view from the Government on the retention of DNA. We believe that the DNA profiles of those arrested for a crime of violence or a sexual offence could be retained for three years with a potential extension for a further two years if a court was satisfied that that was appropriate. That proportionate approach is similar to the one used in Scotland and was specifically recognised by the European Court in the S and Marper judgment as being compliant with the convention.

[James Brokenshire]

We believe that it strikes an appropriate balance between the interests of the state in seeking to solve crime and protect the public, and the privacy interests of the individual citizen.

I look forward to continuing this important debate when the Government reintroduce their Crime and Security Bill in the Commons in the new year, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to some of the questions that have been raised this afternoon.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hancock. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on securing this important and timely debate, given the wider debate that is taking place around DNA and the database. She will know that the matter formed part of the Policing and Crime Bill but, unfortunately, not the Policing and Crime Act 2009; however, it will be part of the Crime and Security Bill to be reintroduced shortly in Parliament.

Let me begin with common ground. My hon. Friend and I share the ambition of keeping the right people on the database, but we clearly will not agree on who they are or the best way to achieve that. In the time that I have, I would like to address some of the particular points that have come up, and then address general points in the body of my remarks.

I begin with the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes). As the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) said, we have locked horns on this issue many times. As I understand it, the hon. Member for Chesterfield complains about a lack of evidence for the changes that we are proposing, and he hopes that we will come back later with proposals based on better research, yet his party's policy proposes largely dismantling what today we know as the DNA database. He quotes the police in aid of his argument. I have not heard that argument from many police officers, and I caution him if he believes that that is the case.

I thought that the hon. Gentleman's comments about the safety and security of the DNA database were particularly ill-judged. The people who keep it safe do a remarkable job. I do not believe that he has any evidence of DNA data somehow being leaked from the database, and the suggestion that dedicated officers who work on the database would be tempted to sell data is as outrageous as it is ill-informed.

Paul Holmes: Of course, I said no such thing. What I said, in a discussion about the Government following the logic of their arguments and having a DNA database of 60-odd million people, was that the bigger a database gets, the more chance there is, first, of mistakes, and, secondly, of material getting out of the domain where it should be into another domain, as we have seen with many other databases.

Mr. Campbell: The assumption would be that that has already happened and that the problem would get bigger. The other assumption is that we intend to have a universal database, but, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I have assured him on many occasions that that is not the case. The two key words are "balance" and "proportionality". We need to strike a balance, and when there are various views from different bodies—scientists, the police, victims, Members of Parliament and the general public—the Government have to decide and make a judgment on where the balance actually lies. The difference between the hon. Gentleman and the Government is that we would draw the line in different places.

Let me turn to some of the specific remarks. I promise to come back in the body of my evidence to the general remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, in which she again repeated the suggestion that being on the database somehow means that one is halfway guilty and halfway innocent. Let me remind her that being on the database is proof of neither guilt nor innocence. In this country, the courts decide whether someone is guilty or innocent. However, I accept that for someone who has been arrested—that is the threshold that we use for taking DNA in this country—having their DNA taken may leave them with the impression that somehow they have done wrong even though the courts have not found that.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend talks about stigma attached to the database. He needs to come to one of the advice surgeries that I run for innocent children whose names are on a database. Their anxious parents are very grateful to me, because that is when they hear for the first time that they can even do anything. I see nervous and frightened children who sometimes are not aware that their DNA has been taken for an indefinite period. There may not be a legal stigma, but I tell him that, in the eyes of the young people, parents and other people in the community who have their DNA taken, there is a definite stigma attached to it.

Mr. Campbell: And in the remarks that followed my original point on this, that is exactly what I was saying. I recognise that people may feel that there is a stigma, but I am making the point for the record that it is not the DNA database that finds people guilty or innocent but the courts.

Jeremy Corbyn: My experience and knowledge of this is that young people are frequently arrested in groups on the streets of any of our cities, particularly in the part of north London that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington and I represent. They are questioned, DNA is taken, and they are warned that the DNA will probably be kept for all time. On many occasions, they are not subsequently charged but are let go. Sometimes, the police make the arrests as a way of calming a situation down and diffusing a problem. That may be a reasonable police tactic, but it is not reasonable then to take DNA evidence which is difficult to remove from the database. At a later stage, the young person finds that they are on some kind of list of suspects as far as the police are concerned because there is a DNA record of them.

Mr. Campbell: I disagree with the final point in my hon. Friend's remarks. Earlier, he spoke about this coming back to haunt people. I hope that people do not go away with the impression that DNA is put to a wider use than its actual purpose. I believe that he is referring

to the point about removing DNA from the database and the guidance that is given, which I shall deal with in a moment.

On over-representation on the database of a particular ethnic group—in short, the number of young men on the DNA database—I know that that has been a concern for some time, and I shall address the point in detail, but I wish to respond to a point that was at least alluded to in earlier comments, that somehow there is indiscriminate collection of DNA, as recently headlined in the evidence of one retired police officer. Let me put on the record that both the Home Office and the police have entirely refuted the claims that were made. In fact, in reporting them, even the newspaper distanced itself somewhat from them. Let me quote Chief Constable Chris Sims, who is the Association of Chief Police Officers lead on DNA. He stated:

"The suggestion that using powers of arrest to obtain DNA has become routine policy is plainly wrong. The law around powers of arrest is very clear."

The police going further than they ought to would not simply be about breaking the rules; it would, of course, be tantamount to breaking the law. I will return to proportionality and over-representation, but I wanted to make that point now.

The point about removing people from databases was made forcefully, and as a Member of Parliament I understand people's ferocity about that. At the moment, removal is at the discretion of chief constables, because they own the data, but in the Crime and Security Bill we are setting out the criteria for removal. Clause 14 will amend the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, and set down not just guidelines, but statutory criteria against which individuals may have their profiles removed. I am happy to go further, and to have a conversation about whether there should be guidelines to be absolutely sure that chief constables know what their responsibilities are in that regard.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does the Minister anticipate that the new guidelines will include guidelines on whether to take DNA in the first place, particularly of young people who are often brought into custody for a short period? Is it necessary or proportionate to take such DNA samples?

Mr. Campbell: We are verging into territory where we must trust the police's discretion in many ways. That involves an argument that I want to develop later about what happens when young people come into contact with the criminal justice system, and the police are often at the front line of that. I prefer to deal with that remark then.

I want to return to why we have a DNA database, which we are told is the biggest in the world. Of course, we must be concerned about individual privacy, but the database exists also to provide justice for victims and their families. Without it, thousands of crimes would be unsolved, and many serious and dangerous criminals would be walking our streets. Added to that is the deterrent effect if someone knows that they are on the DNA database and believes that they would be detected if they did something wrong. It can have a deterrent effect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington listed a catalogue of all sorts of cases that may give rise to concern. I do not want simply to compare my list against hers, but I want to put on record the importance of the DNA database which, in the words of Chief Constable Sims, helps to detect 40,000 crimes a year. I shall give some brief examples.

Mark Dixie, who murdered Sally Anne Bowman, was convicted as a result of DNA taken after he was arrested following a pub brawl in 2006, and subsequently released without charge. His DNA was found to match a sample found at the scene of Sally Anne's murder, and he was subsequently charged, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment with a minimum term of 34 years. When we announced our proposals on DNA, Linda Bowman was reported to have said:

"Before this...announcement, it looked like the police would have to destroy the DNA of anyone cleared of a crime."

When welcoming our proposals, she said:

"Holding DNA is a deterrent to criminals, right from those committing common assault to savage murders."

Paul Holmes: Does the Minister agree that Mark Dixie was not convicted because his DNA was on the database from some years ago when he had not been charged? Nine months after the murder, he was arrested during a pub brawl, and his DNA was taken and run against the national database, so it is not an example of old DNA from an innocent person proving them guilty years later.

Mr. Campbell: Okay. Let me try this example for the hon. Gentleman. Steve Wright murdered five prostitutes in Ipswich in 2003. A DNA sample was taken from him when he was arrested on suspicion of theft. His DNA profile subsequently matched DNA from the body of one of the five women murdered in Ipswich in 2006. Wright was eventually charged with and convicted of the five murders, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the small number of cases in which DNA is appropriate. Let me add significant cases, and let him make his case to the victims' families, because I assure him that their view is different.

Ms Abbott: These dramatic cases are all very well and affecting, but the House is waiting to hear from Ministers the statistical basis to prove that keeping innocent people's DNA solves so many crimes that the balance between privacy and civil liberties needs to be altered in the way the Government are suggesting. The Minister knows that individual cases make hard law.

Mr. Campbell: Let me quote again Chris Sims, chief constable of the west midlands who leads for ACPO on DNA. He said on 10 September that 40,000 crimes are matched every year, that the database is helping to keep us safe, and that reducing the numbers on it will tip the balance towards making people feel less safe. I pray in aid that point, because he is giving the other side of the story.

Ms Abbott: Where is the research?

Mr. Campbell: I will come to the research in a moment. I pray in aid that point simply to show that it is plain common sense that the further we diminish the database, the higher the number of crimes that might otherwise be solved but will not be solved. We must draw a line appropriately.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Campbell: I am running out of time, so I will not give way.

We must strike a balance, and we consider that our proposals in the Crime and Security Bill do just that. There is a debate about so-called innocence, and I am sure that we will return to that.

We have not plucked the period of six years at random. There is not an enormous amount of evidence out there that we can bring to bear, but nor can the hon. Lady. We commissioned evidence, and we are basing our proposals on that evidence. On the best evidence available to us, six years represents the period for which someone who has been arrested once remains more likely than other members of the public to be arrested again.

In case the hon. Member for Hornchurch wants to point out where that line is drawn, six years is a shorter period, and the period of propensity to reoffend is longer than six years. We believe that it is appropriate to retain material from those who have been arrested, but not subsequently convicted, and that is not unique to this country; it applies in a number of countries throughout Europe. When the European Court of Human Rights considered S and Marper, it noted those systems with approval, and agreed that the state can keep fingerprint and DNA information if it pursues the legitimate purpose of detection and, therefore, prevention of crime. The question is: where is proportionality?

Let me turn briefly to over-representation. The DNA database is not self-populating. Before someone's profile can be added, that person must have been arrested for a recordable offence, and that arrest must have been necessary in law. That is a significant threshold. The problem is that over-representation of any group in the rest of the criminal justice system is likely to be reflected on the DNA database. Our work to look at over-representation of particular groups in the criminal justice system is particularly important. Just focusing on the DNA database, which is somewhat upstream, is interesting, but the reality is that we need to make changes further downstream. We need to know why certain groups coming into contact with the criminal justice system are being arrested and having their DNA taken, which was the point raised by the hon. Member for Hornchurch.

Jeremy Corbyn: But not charged.

Mr. Campbell: But not charged. However, if the profiles of those who are arrested but not convicted are not kept, a significant group of people who are statistically more likely than the rest of the population to offend within the following six years will be removed from the database. That is the balance that we must strike between people's privacy and the right of the rest of society to keep itself and others safe.

Turning to the point about children—the European Court made special reference to children—I want to point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington that we have taken account of what the Court said. There are different proposals for children—

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Listed Sporting Events

4 pm

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan) (Lab): It is pleasure to be under your tutelage this afternoon, Mr. Hancock. It is also a pleasure to talk about the Davies report and the rugby league challenge cup. Those of us in the rugby league community see the cup as extremely iconic, not only for rugby league, but for sport in general. It is important that we give the Minister and his team in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport some reasons why the rugby league challenge cup final should be on the A- list, and remain free to view for the UK public.

The report was commissioned by the previous Secretary of State for the DCMS, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). Interestingly, he was as surprised as the rest of us when it was concluded that the rugby league challenge cup should be delisted, and he put out a press release to that effect. I hope that the current Secretary of State will take note of that, and that he will talk to his predecessor and take his views on board.

The Secretary of State has indicated that there will be a 12-week consultation on this matter. I hope that the Minister will give us more detail and put on the record the way in which members of the public can have some input in the consultation, as it is not immediately clear—perhaps it would be helpful to have an e-mail address or whatever. One of the surprising things in the Davies report, and in the report by Frontier Economics which went with it, was the paucity of public input in the consultation.

The Davies report asked Frontier Economics to do a background report, which is a detailed read that gives a lot of background information about how people view sport on television, and whether or not they have access to TV sport on satellite and so on for which they pay, or on a free-to-view service. It is an impressive document, which the Davies report, quite properly, draws on.

I have also read the Davies report, which is interesting to say the least. However, one of the things that it did not do well, was interview sports bodies. There were interviews and so on, but when representatives from rugby league came along, only three out of the eight members of the Davies committee were at the interview. We understand that people who do those kinds of things do so on a voluntary basis and have other interests. Nevertheless, when looking at something this important, it is not good to have less than half of the people available. That was not true only for the rugby league presentation. I understand that a presentation was also made by the England and Wales Cricket Board, and that only four members of the committee were present. There are some difficulties regarding the legitimacy of the report and its conclusions when only a small number of people were present.

Paragraph 156 of the Davies report states:

"The Panel accepted that sports governing bodies should be best placed to know what was in the best interests of their sport now and for the future."

If the members of the committee think that the best thing to do is to talk to the sports bodies, it is incumbent on them to turn up, listen to and question any points that are made.

Another point that is made in the report is about the access that people in this country have to pay TV. There is not a lot of difference by social class—roughly 50 per cent. of people in all social classes have access to pay TV, give or take 5 per cent. either way. However, among people whose income is less than £11,500, there is a big drop, and the figure for pay TV goes down to below 15 per cent. on average. The other important factor is that although there is not much variation between different age groups, if we look at those aged 75 or over, less than 30 per cent. have access to pay TV. Taking the rugby league challenge cup final out of free-to-air viewing would exclude a lot of people who are currently able to watch that iconic sporting event.

The report provides some detail about the differences in the viewing figures for the challenge cup, which is free to air, and those for the grand final, which is on Sky TV. I have no objection to Sky TV. It does a superb job and has improved the way in which television portrays our sport, and other sports. It has raised the profile of the sport, and developed the ability of TV to make sporting events more iconic, available and interesting for the viewers. This is not an attack on Sky TV—far from it; it does an extremely good job. However, the number of people who watched the challenge cup final on free-to-air TV was six times the number who watched the grand final. Anybody who knows rugby league knows that the grand final is the epitome and pinnacle of the rugby league season. It is when the two best teams play each other—knock-out competitions tend to be a little more open, and depend on the way in which the balls come out of the hat. If only a sixth of those who watch the challenge cup can watch the grand final, that tells us something about the issue.

Frontier Economics has tried to analyse the effects on the sport, but it largely looks at the financial impact. It does not look at the real issues that people in rugby league want to know about. That misses the point, not only for rugby league but for all sports—the super league, the Ashes, Wimbledon, and so on. All those events are at the very pinnacle of sport, but below them, there is a huge base of people who play or have played sport, and who are interested in it. That is an important point, which I shall return to later.

As I said, the committee consulted the public. Surprisingly, only 148 people responded. I say "surprisingly", but I am not all that surprised. I did not know that the public were being asked, as I might have put in a recommendation or said something about the issue. However, there were only 148 responses, which is very poor. That is why it is important that in his response, the Minister gives us some idea of how people can respond to the consultation process that he will undertake.

Let us look at some of the details. Sixty-two people responded to question 12, which asked what the most important issue was for them. Of those respondents, 12 people—the largest group—said that affordability was important. That goes back to my earlier point about those people on low incomes and the over-75s. We risk excluding a lot of those people, and that is what most of the respondents were concerned about.

In question 9b, the majority of those who responded said that they wanted no change whatsoever to the listing process. When asked whether the rugby league challenge cup final should be moved from the A-list to the B-list, no respondents wanted that to happen. When asked whether some events should be moved from the B-list to the A-list, so that they would be shown on free-to-air TV, four people said that the rugby league challenge cup should be shown in full, rather than as highlights. They were saying that they wanted to see games all the way through, not just the highlights of games. Of the 136 people who responded to question 9d, only three—or 2.2 per cent.—said that the challenge cup should be moved. Not only would none of us be elected on 2.2 per cent., but none of us would retain our deposits.

The committee went on to consider what the criteria should say. Paragraph 138 says that there should be some amendments to the criteria. Paragraph 154 also refers to what they should look like. I will not read them all out, but paragraph 138 states that a relevant event should be

"a pre-eminent national or international event in sport",

should involve

"the national team or national representatives in the sport concerned"

and should

"be likely to command a large television audience."

Paragraph 154 states that the panel concluded that

"the 'other factors' in the current criteria that the Secretary of State may take into account—including the potential impact of listing on the income to a sport—should not strictly form part of the criteria for listing, but were matters for the Secretary of State to the extent that it is appropriate for him to take them into account".

I am sure that that sounded good in the original double Dutch, but it does give some indication that the Secretary of State has a little leeway.

There is no definition in the Davies report of what the criteria that were set out mean in practice. That is important. I know that other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall just give what I think are the major reasons why the rugby league challenge cup should be included and why the Secretary of State should not take account of the Davies report's recommendations.

The most important reason is the community nature of our sport. I do not think that there is another professional sport anywhere in the UK with the community base that rugby league has. It goes right the way down. All of us here could name teams in our areas whose players play rugby league from the age of five right the way through. Although that is also the case in other sports, there is a difference. I remember that in the 1980s and '90s, we had Steve Hampton, Joe Lydon, Shaun Edwards and Andy Gregory playing for what was probably the greatest rugby league team around—not just then, but before or since. They played for a Wigan team and were all born and brought up in Wigan. If we look at the current Wigan team, we see Sam Tomkins, Joel Tomkins, Gareth Hock and so on. Right the way through that Wigan team are players who were born and brought up in Wigan, and that would be the same in Leeds, Bradford and Widnes. All those players come right the way through, and it is very important that we have that community that feeds up into the challenge cup final.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Stephen Twigg.

Derek Twigg: Derek Twigg, even.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Sorry. The ball went through my hands there, Mr. Twigg.

Derek Twigg: Can I put this point to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner)? He is making an excellent and very powerful speech. It is a disgrace even to suggest the change that we are discussing. He has made strong arguments about that. At a time when we have seen criticism of footballers, cheating and everything else, here we have a sport whose players are known for their courage, tenacity, skills and, above all, honesty. Is that not exactly the sort of sport that we should be projecting to a much wider audience?

Mr. Turner: I am very grateful for that intervention. My hon. Friend has probably pinched about three seconds of my speech, but that is neither here nor there because I fully agree with him. The point that he makes is very important. In rugby league, most of the players come from quite deprived backgrounds. Many of them do not have the family discipline that perhaps exists in other families, but going into rugby league gives them that discipline. It gives them the personal satisfaction of achieving excellence in speed, skill, ball-handling ability and so on. Also, if someone makes a mistake and a penalty is awarded against them, it is 10 metres, and that is 10 metres that the forwards have to get back and they do not like it. They tell their colleagues, "You stop giving away penalties." If someone is sent off or sin-binned, the whole team get buttered for that. I think that my hon. Friend's point was about that peer group discipline.

Equally, the respect that the officials receive in rugby league is paramount. That applies to rugby union as well; we should be fair about that. In rugby, nobody questions the decisions of the officials, which is absolutely right. That self-discipline comes from playing the game; people have an understanding of how to talk to officials and so on. I remember going to two games at the Millennium stadium. One was Wigan Athletic against Manchester United in the Carling cup. There was segregation. There were police all over the place. There was no trouble, as it happened; nevertheless, there was that anticipation. I then went to watch Wigan Warriors playing St. Helens. There were no police about. There was no segregation. Alcohol was freely available. It was a great atmosphere and a great day. The difference between the two comes from the community spirit that flows all the way through the game of rugby. It is important that the rugby league challenge cup is on free-to-air television so that we can project that to the nation. We can do that by having the schools, which provide the usual opener to our game, there and we can show what our game can do for the individual, for sport and for rugby league. It is important that when the Secretary of State finishes his consultation—we shall ensure that he gets many more than the 148 people responding in the first instance—he takes that on board and ensures that the rugby league challenge cup final is free to air so that everybody can see it.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Can I ask you, Mr. Hoyle, to be fair and to respect the referee's decision to give the Minister time to give you the good news that I am sure he will in this event? If you could keep your comments to a minimum, the Minister will have enough time to respond to any points that you want to make and to those of your colleagues.

4.17 pm

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Thank you for that advice, Mr. Hancock. Obviously, in rugby league, we have a thing called a yellow card, so if I get two yellow cards, I will know that I have to sit down. Allowing for that, may I first say thank you to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner)? He has put forward the reasons for his argument extremely eloquently. He has explained that the case is so strong that there can be no other decision than keeping rugby league in the A-list. That is what this is about. As he set out, it seems absurd that a committee sits with less than 50 per cent. attendance to make a decision to take rugby league off the A-list—off free-to-air television. I would have thought that common sense would have prevailed on the idea that the greatest sport in the world, with one of the finest cup finals to be played at Wembley, could not be on free-to-view television in the future. That is unacceptable. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister, rocking back on his chair, recognises the sport and how great the game is. It will be a crying shame if suddenly the Davies report is accepted. We need the decision to be reversed, and reversed quickly. We need to lift that uncertainty.

Of course, Sky has done a lot for rugby league. I have to say that I was the only person at the rugby league meeting in Wigan who did not vote for Sky. I hold my hands up and say that at that meeting, when Sky came with the big cheque book, I was the only one who stood up and did not accept the Sky money, because my commitment is to free-to-view television.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right when he says that Sky has done a lot for rugby league. Does he not really believe, though, that Sky has done a lot for Sky? That is what this debate is about. It wants to do even more for Sky by taking this cup final away. We should not allow that.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): That is a bit of a wet ball, but back to you, Mr. Hoyle.

Mr. Hoyle: I totally agree. My differences with Sky in relation to rugby league were many years ago. The one thing that I have always been committed to is the game of rugby league. I will always remain strongly supportive of the game at both amateur and professional level. This is about balance. Sky is doing the championship games; it is doing the premiership and the super league. Every week, it is rolling out good matches and good coverage. However, when it comes to the cup final, the exciting part, bringing teams together, we must ensure that the finest game in the world is available on free-to-view television.

I cannot express that passion enough to the Minister. We must get that message across. Rugby league is one big family, whether we are talking about the members of the family in Australia or the national game of Papua New Guinea. Wherever it is in the world, rugby league is united on one thing: it is a great sport, a family sport, a sport to which we can all be committed. Do not

throw the baby out with the bathwater by making the wrong decision. We educate people in the south by showing the game live from Wembley, so do not allow that to go. The finest experience that I have had this season has been that of my father walking out at Wembley, leading Warrington out and coming back to Warrington with the challenge cup. There is no finer experience that I could have. Chorley Panthers had the Tomkins brothers there, so we are a good feeder club to Wigan, and long may that continue. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan for ensuring that this debate is taking place, and that we get the right decision. I can see how serious the matter is when I look behind the Minister and see that he has four officials sitting there writing, recognising that rugby league must remain. Thank you very much.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Hoyle, for a spirited contribution. I now give the floor to the Minister—follow that.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Siôn Simon): I will do my best, Mr. Hancock. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I hope that we will not be interrupted by a vote, but I slightly fear that we might.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) on securing the debate and on his magnificent contribution. He is like a shaggy bearded lion of the rugby league world, and is ably assisted in his exhortations by his hon. Friends from the rest of the north-west.

Mr. Neil Turner: And Yorkshire and the north-east.

Mr. Simon: Indeed. I am minded to note that the last time there was a listed events review was in 1998, which was, I think, also the last time that the rugby league challenge cup final was won by Wigan Warriors. No, that was the super league grand final win.

I begin by reaffirming the Government's view that we recognise the importance of ensuring that as many people as possible have the opportunity to enjoy our most important sporting events on free-to-air TV. We all recognise that sport is a central part of the national fabric, of our national identity, and of what makes up the kind of society we are. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) said, nothing can quite replicate the excitement and the passion that can be generated by our great sporting events. Only last year, we saw the passion that surrounded British participants in the Olympics and the Paralympics, next year we will have the World cup in South Africa, and in 2012 we will have the Olympics in London. We want to ensure—there will be no doubt about it—that those kinds of national and centrally important sporting events—

Mr. Neil Turner: May I remind the Minister that in 2013 we will have the rugby league world cup as well?

Mr. Simon: I did not mention that myself only because I wanted to give one of the hon. Gentlemen the opportunity to intervene and put it on the record.

I have said why we have listed events. The decision to review the listed events was based on a range of factors, partly on the recognition that with the development of digital technologies and the changes to the broadcasting environment there are far more channels and far more ways to watch sporting events. In addition, subscription's place in the broadcasting economy is completely different from what it was. To take account of all those developments, the Government set up an independent advisory panel to review the free-to-air events regime and make recommendations to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Hoyle: Does the Minister not agree that less than 50 per cent. of the panel turning up to hear the evidence represents a failure?

Mr. Simon: Before I could make such a judgment, I would need more evidence than the second-hand anecdotes we have had about two meetings—

Mr. Hoyle: But what if what I said was correct?

Mr. Simon: We will look at the evidence if that ever becomes an issue, but it is not something that we should get hung up on. Let me return to the details that my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan asked for, of the review process and how it has gone.

David Davies chaired the panel and was asked to review three areas: the principle of having a list, the criteria against which events are listed, and the content of any list. It was recognised that the widest possible range of views needed to be taken. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan said, the panel commissioned research. It undertook a public consultation from 8 April to 20 July, and wrote to 187 sporting, media, broadcasting, viewer and other organisations, inviting them to participate, and some of those organisations had meeting with members of the panel. Not every member of the panel attended every meeting, as has been noted, but I do not doubt that there will have been consistency of membership. Others of those organisations made submissions in writing. Perhaps not every member on every occasion, but the panel as an entity visited the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, arranged a joint meeting of the all-party media and sports groups, and generally put itself about and talked to as many people as possible.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): The Minister will not know this, but it would be interesting to find out how many of the panel have been to a challenge cup final. I wonder whether the Minister himself has been to one. All of us who go and see the very large crowd at that fantastic occasion simply cannot understand the decision. We also think that there is a blind spot. The Minister probably does not realise that Leeds Rhinos regularly have the biggest average crowds of any rugby club in the country. Rugby is a popular spectator sport, but that is not being reflected.

Mr. Simon: The hon. Gentleman makes that point very well. I cannot speak for the proclivities of the panel. Having grown up in a Welsh family, I was taught early the other way, in rugby terms, and then went to the only grammar school in Birmingham where they played only football, not rugby. So, no, I have never been to a rugby league challenge cup final, although if the hon. Gentleman is inviting me, I would love to go.

The panel reached clear conclusions as to the criterion that should be used in determining whether an event should be listed—the major event test. I am conscious

[Mr. Simon]

that I have only three minutes left, so I will not read out the definition of a major event but will move on to the Secretary of State's provisional conclusions.

The Secretary of State provisionally—I do not just emphasise that word with my voice; it is underlined on the piece of paper—concluded that he was minded to recommend that the recommendations be accepted. Those recommendations were, first, that there should in principle be a list; secondly, that the major event test should be a key criterion in drawing up the list; and thirdly, to accept the view that the events identified passed the major event test. The Secretary of State considers that the panel has come forward with a persuasive set of reasons, and he agrees that as many people as possible should have as much access as possible to events of major importance. We are particularly concerned—my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan raised this concern—about the ability of people on a low income to access subscriber services. They might otherwise be excluded from these nationally important events. We believe that listed events are part of our national identity, but we are also clear that the panel expressed no view and took no account of the impact or consequences on the sport or sporting body of the listing, stating that it considered that such matters were for the Secretary of State to take into account.

Our provisional conclusion is, therefore, that the final decision should take account of the possible impacts—not looked at by the report—that such listing might have on the sport or the event in question. We therefore consider that the major event test needs to be accompanied by an impact assessment. That will involve considering any matters relating to the impacts of listing that are drawn to the Secretary of State's attention, then assessing whether listing would have a disproportionate impact on the interests of those adversely affected by it—*[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley is willing me on. Having reached his provisional conclusions, the Secretary of State is required to carry out a statutory consultation with the broadcasting authorities in line with the Broadcasting Act 1996. I am trying to conclude as quickly as possible before the time runs out. There is a consultation that runs until March. As part of that consultation—

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry Minister, but despite playing a blinder you have been beaten by the clock.

We now move on to the next debate. However, I point out to the Minister and the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) that we expect Divisions in the House at any moment. I leave it to you to decide whether you want come back between votes—I understand that there will a series of them. That would make for a disjointed debate, but we could suspend the sitting for an appropriate period.

British Forces Post Office

4.30 pm

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): I raise a subject today that is not much talked about. In recent weeks and months, we have become used to our armed forces making the news. Much focus is given, and rightly so, to what is happening in our theatres of operation. Today, however, I want to concentrate on something that will affect many military families—the proposed changes to some of the postal services. I also wish to talk about postal services to Afghanistan.

I know from personal experience that the British Forces Post Office has for many years provided a vital link between forces personnel and their immediate families, and wider friends and families. The service was cheap, and it was certainly efficient; I assume that nothing has changed. It was always highly valued by those who sometimes felt a long way from home. It is worth noting a little of its history.

In 1808, during the peninsular war, the first Army post office was put into operation. It was followed during the first Chinese war in 1840 with another Army post office. In 1882, Queen Victoria authorised the formation of the Army Post Office Corps to serve during the Egyptian and Sudanese campaigns. A number of reorganisations took place—it is not a modern fad, as we often think—but eventually the Royal Engineers (Postal Section) was formed.

That organisation served during the first world war in France, Belgium, the Dardanelles, Egypt, Palestine, east Africa, Greece, Italy and north Russia. The ingenuity of the personnel was unlimited. As well as being transported by conventional means, mail was transported by mule, sleigh, trawler, minesweeper—in fact, by any form of available transport. That is an example of the resourcefulness of the organisation, which has always given high priority to getting messages to the troops.

In March 1919, the first regular airmail service from Folkestone to Cologne was set up to provide British troops in Germany with a fast mail service. It was the world's first scheduled airmail service. Due to its success, the model was adopted by civil post offices worldwide. I could spend 15 minutes recounting the development of the forces postal service. The organisation's history of resourcefulness and its ability to adapt over the years to ensure that our troops had access to the biggest morale booster of all—mail from home—is second to none. However, it was with some consternation that I learned of plans to close 12 of the forces post offices. The offices destined for closure are those providing support—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House. I am in your hands. You may prefer to come back after you have voted, so that we can move straight away, so that when the three of us are back here we can recommence. We will adjourn for an appropriate time.

4.34 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.6 pm

On resuming—

Sandra Gidley: Hopefully, I will have a clear run to the end of the debate.

The offices destined for closure are those providing support to the UK elements of NATO headquarters. Now, I must declare a small interest here.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): I want to congratulate the hon. Lady on securing a very important debate. Quite rightly, she spelled out the importance of boosting morale, and the morale-booster is getting the mail there, never more so than getting mail to the front line of theatre. I think that she would agree with me that what we need from the Minister, when he gives his winding-up speech, is confirmation that the theatre will not be affected and that that vital link between families, friends, sweethearts or whatever they may be will continue, that mail will always get there and that we always ought to see if we can get more. Does she agree?

Sandra Gidley: I could not possibly disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has to rush off, but if he stayed to hear the end of my speech he would hear me return to that issue very forcefully. As I probably hinted in my historical comments, this issue was very important and it remains so to this day; it may even be more important now, so I thank him for his intervention.

My small interest in this area centres on the fact that one of the BFPO numbers that will be affected—well, the number will exist, but the post office will close—is BFPO 28, which serves Brunssum in the Netherlands. For a couple of years, that was my number and my address, so that I could keep in touch with my teenage friends back in England. The service was effectively subsidised, so it was cheap to use and, as I said earlier, it was efficient.

Teenagers today probably use a home personal computer, and the art of letter-writing is dying out somewhat. However, when I was a teenager, I had to write to my granny—well, I wanted to write to my granny. As we all know, granny is less likely to have a computer, so we should not lose sight of the range of people with whom a forces family will want to keep in touch. The postal mechanisms are not just available to the forces themselves, but to those responding to the letters.

The forces have always tried to adapt to changing times. There is now a system for something known as the e-bluey. Letters are e-mailed directly to the BFPO, which then dispatches them via the traditional postal system. Obviously, such developments are welcome. My understanding is that the BPFO numbers themselves will be retained, but the forces post offices will be closed and only a limited postal receipt and dispatch facility will be left. There will no longer be a facility to send parcels to the UK, although it will still be possible to receive parcels.

One of the biggest drawbacks of the proposed system is that the over-the-counter post office services will cease and for services outside basic mail provision, forces personnel and their dependants will use the relevant international mail system. That will invariably mean that people will have to pay more to send parcels and they will also have to depend on the vagaries of less efficient postal systems. We sometimes knock the British postal system, but in comparison with other systems it is very good. Currently, for example, someone at BFPO 8 in Naples can send a BFPO letter weighing up to 100 grams for 39p; hopefully, the Minister can confirm that that will continue. However, if they want to send a small letter-type package of just over 100 grams, the picture changes. The current BFPO cost is 90p, but the cost of sending a similarly sized package through the Italian premium mail service—I do not think that anyone with experience of the Italian postal service would risk paying less for the slower service—ranges from just over £1 to more than £1.50. To some, that might not seem like a huge difference, but costs mount up over the course of a year. In Norway, at BFPO 50, the costs are even higher: it costs about £4 to send a letter of just over 100 grams to the UK. Costs are even higher for personnel based in the USA. The situation gets worse when applied to parcels, as the cost of sending some of them will double.

It could be argued that gift vouchers and so on can be used, but people like to receive personal gifts. There is another side to it as well. Despite the best efforts of the NAAFI, there is always something from home that people living in another country yearn for. UK-based families often make up packages of such sought-after items and post them. That, too, will cost more in future, and even if a small adjustment is made to the cost-of-living allowance for those based abroad, it will not be extended to families in the UK who send things to our forces.

There are also broader concerns. It is now widely accepted that there will be less money in future to spend on public services and that all organisations will look for efficiency savings. The UK has other overseas postings, and many personnel are still based in Germany. Will the Minister give me an assurance today that there will be no further slash and burn of BFPO services? Currently, 23,000 personnel are based in Germany, and they could be looking at NATO's savings with some trepidation.

I also want to use this opportunity to mention those who send cards, gifts and letters to our troops in Afghanistan. Military personnel at the sharp end acknowledge that troops on the ground appreciate support from back home, but mountains of well-intentioned mail can cause difficulties that outweigh the benefits. Mail from friends and family—the packages that have the greatest effect on morale—can be delayed significantly. If someone does not receive something from their family, they might become concerned that something is wrong, which could obviously detract from their day job.

The onward delivery of good-will parcels to forward operating bases necessitates additional supply flights and convoys, which the Ministry of Defence says puts our personnel at greater risk every time an extra convoy is added. I am sure that nobody sending a parcel would want the troops to be put at greater risk. The MOD is keen to ensure that members of the public who wish to support British service personnel can do so, and I understand that a list of recommended service charities has been drawn up.

The standard advice seems to be that if someone wants to help, they should donate to one of the charities. The preferred charity appears to be the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association, which has a long record of work in supporting our troops. I do not wish to deter people from sending money to that worthwhile charity, but it is important for some people to feel that they are making or doing something practical. They might not have huge amounts of money and might think that what little they have is best given in the form

[Sandra Gidley]

of a personalised gift. There are also troops who are not in touch with their families and do not receive anything from loved ones. For them, a parcel must be a morale booster, whoever it is from. Many members of the public who want to do something might not be aware of the warning not to send parcels.

I decided to google the subject. Typing in the keywords "parcels", "soldiers" and "Afghanistan" produced the following results. The top link was to a charity called Support our Soldiers, which—guess what—sends parcels to troops, except that it now says that it cannot accept more gifts, only money. The second link was to a story about Joanne Goody-Orris and her partner Maurice Benton, two pensioners who have been sending parcels for some time and have received many letters of thanks from grateful service personnel. The third hit mentioned a scheme in Otley, and the fourth a woman named Maria Wood, described as Father Christmas to the troops. The fifth concerned Karen Brittle from Orford, a similarly public-spirited individual. The sixth described a campaign last summer by the *Dorset Echo*, the seventh was a Yahoo! discussion of what to include in parcels and the eighth was a link to the *Birmingham Mail*.

I could go on, but I think that the Minister gets the gist. The information available is not terribly relevant to what is happening on the ground. No helpful guidance exists on the best way to help our troops. It is probably too late to make a difference this year, but in all likelihood, our troops will be in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. An interested and engaged public will continue to want to help and show their support in the most practical and personal way possible.

My plea is this. It should not be beyond the wit of the MOD to ensure that the first Google hit gives official advice, tells people the best way to help and directs them to approved charities. I urge the Minister to do so in order to help people make the most of their efforts. My second suggestion might require a little more work. I hope that the MOD will like it; it could work with a charity to see whether the idea can be developed. When people support Oxfam, for example, they can make a donation to buy mosquito nets or a goat. I am not suggesting that we send goats to our troops in Afghanistan, but in preparing for this debate, I became aware that many of them find certain small pieces of gadgetry useful, such as a wind-up torch. A member of the public could go to a website and decide whether to fund a wind-up torch or another gift, and their name could become associated with that gift. They could also name a recipient or group of recipients, because one reason why people want to give tangible things is that they want the soldiers to know that they are in their thoughts. A physical gift makes that knowledge much more real, and such a gift could be seen to benefit a real person instead of being swallowed up by an anonymous charity pot. People are not always sure where the money goes.

It seems to be a relatively simple idea that could work. It would relieve the strain on the system while making people feel that they were giving something tangible, and the soldier would receive a real gift. I hope that the Minister will want to do it. It would usefully channel the efforts of the many people who want to do their bit to help. I shall end my remarks by thanking all those who will be away from their families this Christmas doing their duty for our country, but I feel somehow that that is insufficient, and I want to do more. That is exactly how many people feel who have sent or want to send parcels to our troops.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Kevan Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) on securing this debate. The British Forces Post Office provides official and private mail services for Her Majesty's forces and their dependants worldwide and within the establishment in the UK. I am aware that mail is a major contributor to morale, as she suggests, and ensuring that mail gets to our servicemen and women is a key priority.

I will start by distinguishing between the operational theatre, which is what the hon. Lady was referring to, and overseas permanent bases. Operational theatres are supported by our Enduring Free mail service. I would like to put it on record that, contrary to what appears on some websites, the changes that we are making to the BFPO will not affect the Enduring Free mail service to our troops on operations. There will be no change to that service at all. It is a top priority for the Ministry of Defence to ensure that our servicemen and women in Afghanistan get the mail and support that they need from their families. We recognise how important it is for them to get messages from home.

We have made great strides, as the hon. Lady suggests. One of the most popular ways to communicate now is the e-bluey, which is used increasingly to send not just letters but photographs and, as I saw a few weeks ago in Afghanistan, items such as a five-year-old's paintings from school. It is a big morale booster for soldiers to receive personalised mail, and service usage has gone from 30,000 items a month less than three years ago to well over 100,000.

On the changes we are making, I do not recognise the description of the slash and burn of our overseas post offices, although I recognise that the Liberal Democrats are prone to using emotive language. We are changing 10 locations in Europe and one in the US NATO headquarters: at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, Brussels, Brunssum, Ramstein, Stavanger, Karup, Rome, Milan, Lisbon and Valencia; and Norfolk, Virginia in the United States. Clearly, those are not operational locations, but are in first-world countries that have sophisticated and modern postal services.

As a result of the proposed changes, a limited postal receipt and dispatch facility will be maintained, but the over-the-counter postal service will end. There will no longer be a facility to send parcels back to the UK, but it will be possible for people to receive them. That will save about £1.3 million a year. As the hon. Lady knows, we are trying to free up as much money as possible for the front line. I think that we can introduce this efficiency without adversely affecting the service. We have consulted the three armed forces federations and I put on record my thanks to them for their input into the review. Although the over-the-counter services will cease, people at the sites will retain their BFPO numbers, which is important in banking, applying for credit, internet shopping and voter registration.

For services outside BFPO provision, the international mail system that is used by business and the public to send letters in Europe and the US will be available. The

hon. Lady mentioned the increased cost of sending mail using the international postal service, but the overseas allowance will change to cover that increase. I do not see the changes as draconian, but as maintaining the service in an efficient way.

On operational post, the Enduring Free mail service has been popular and it is important for morale to ensure that servicemen and women receive regular packages of mail from home. I was in Afghanistan two weeks ago and know the importance that our servicemen and women—especially those at forward operating bases—place on receiving mail from home.

Like the hon. Lady, I do not want to discourage the generosity of the British public in supporting our servicemen and women. However, there is a problem of unsolicited mail. I was in the post office in Kandahar two weeks ago. The lady who ran it said that up to 30 per cent. of the packages received were unsolicited mail. Her concern was that at Christmas, when it is important that mail from home gets to people's loved ones, the unsolicited mail was clogging up the system. Some of the items that people send are a little inappropriate, to say the least. For example, our search dogs do not need dog food and the soldiers do not need cat food for local cats in the villages in which they are stationed. I accept that people send such things out of the best of intentions.

If people wish to support our servicemen and women, we ask them to support SSAFA Forces Help and the operational welfare fund. The operational welfare fund does not work exactly as the hon. Lady described, but it does provide electronic kit for people in theatre. For example, laptop projectors were recently provided at one of the FOBs, so that people could watch films. Therefore, there are examples of the cash that is given being turned into direct help and providing benefits that people welcome.

Sandra Gidley: I was suggesting an extension of that scheme, which is the right method. A link should be created between the giver and the recipient so that one can acknowledge the other. That would help to humanise the process. The fundamental point is that the Ministry of Defence produced this advice, but it is difficult to access. Not everybody would have heard the news on the particular day that it was announced. A lot of people are still not aware of the message that there are more appropriate ways of giving.

Mr. Jones: I accept the hon. Lady's good intentions, but if the system is overcomplicated, it will be difficult to get the information out. I think that getting the money in and deciding on a case-by-case basis what people require, through talking to local commanders, is a better way of doing it. If people want to make donations, they can do so by visiting www.bmycharity.com. I urge everyone who wants to support our troops to give money rather than send parcels.

The hon. Lady referred to servicemen and women who might not have family sending parcels to them. We support—and encourage others to support—Support Our Soldiers and Thank The Forces. Last week, I launched this year's uk4u Thanks! Christmas boxes, which contain some of the practical equipment that she mentioned. That is manageable and should be supported. There are ways to give. I use this debate to get the message out again not to send unsolicited mail to our servicemen and women. If people can give, please will they give generously to the charities that support our servicemen and women?

The changes are practical and will ensure that we have a cost-effective system of providing for and supporting our servicemen and women, whether they are on operations or in non-operational bases across the world. I urge people to look in detail at what we are doing, rather than just reading the headlines that have been written on certain websites in the last few months.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 December 2009

[HYWEL WILLIAMS *in the Chair*]

Pensioner Poverty

[Relevant documents: Fifth Report from the Work and Pensions Committee Session 2008-09 HC 411 and the Government response HC 1029.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(*Mark Tami.*)

2.30 pm

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North) (Lab): Although this is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams, it does not make it any less of a pleasure.

Unusually, I should like to start by thanking the Government for their fairly positive response to our report, which is not something that we are used to in our Committee. It usually takes two or three years for our fantastically good suggestions to bear fruit, but this time the Government have accepted much of what we said. Moreover, we should recognise the many organisations that submitted evidence to us and the hard work that they, and the witnesses who gave evidence for the report, put in.

When considering pensioner poverty, we need to focus on three distinct groups: today's pensioners, people who are nearly retired, and the remainder of the population. In his report in 1948, which seems a long time ago now, Beveridge said that the state pension on its own would never be enough on which to live in retirement, and that it would always have to be supplemented by savings or insurance. It is that last bit that most people forget. All the letters that we get as constituency MPs say, "I can't live on the state pension; it is not enough. You should put it up." Somewhere along the way, we lost that behavioural imperative of providing for our retirement through those two additional vehicles. It was partly in response to that situation that we got the 1975 Castle revisions, which brought in, among others things, SERPS and earnings-related elements.

By the 1980s, many of those changes had been eliminated or significantly reduced. The Social Security Act 1988 had the unfortunate consequence of what we now know as pensions mis-selling, with many people being deluded into coming out of relatively good final salary schemes into personal pension arrangements. In 1994, post-Maxwell, we had the 2,000 page Goode report, which, rather oddly, made no mention of annuities. One of the main things to come out of that report was the minimum funding requirements. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when employers went into liquidation, it was discovered that a large number of schemes were deficient and that the minimum funding regime had never worked properly. The consequence of that was a financial assistance scheme, which, at the last count, would cost about £8 billion. It is clear, therefore, that significant sums of money come into play in such matters.

Those events led to the establishment of the Turner commission. It is very telling that the commission finally reported in 2005, four and a half years ago. Although we have moved a long way in terms of time, the same is not true of legislative responses. A number of changes are due to come in next year that should address some deficiencies. We were expecting personal accounts in 2012, but after yesterday, they look like being delayed for a year, which is sad and will have consequences.

So, who are the pensioners living in poverty? It is largely women, because, historically, most of that generation either never worked or had very short working lives, and that was the way in which society was organised at the time. Sadly, some of those who worked never came off what was called the married woman's stamp, so they never accrued pension entitlement themselves.

The second large group affected by pensioner poverty are black and minority ethnic communities. There is no obvious explanation for that other than, as a group, they tend to have lower earnings than the national average, and higher unemployment. The third significant group that suffers from pensioner poverty consists of those who live in inner London. No real insight has been given on why that is, but it may be due to a combination of a deep concentration of BME communities and large numbers of retired women.

One of the major responses—in fact, the principal response—to pensioner poverty has been pension credit. Never in the history of government has so much time, effort and finance been put into a take-up campaign as has been put into that for pension credit. All the evidence shows that the amount invested has diminishing returns. The vast majority of those who are entitled to the guarantee element receive it. However, we need to become more scientific about where we direct our effort on take-up, and particularly look at the BME community, those who live in inner London and any other blips that show up in the statistics.

Certain groups are likely to end up in poverty in retirement, including low earners, the disabled, carers and those with broken work records. The other thing that will lead to a lot of people suffering from poverty in retirement is longevity. Someone might retire at 65 with a reasonable or modest pension and an accumulation of savings, but savings run down over time. The longer they live, the more expenses they face to tackle the effects of ageing and poorer health, and the more their assets disappear. So, what initially was a comfortable retirement inevitably leads to a distressing situation.

Over the years, the accumulation of pension savings and assets has received enormous concentration and no end of debate in the House, but little attention has been given to "decumulation". There is a minimal amount of advice about what to do when one gets to retirement age, and that links back to some of the debates about annuities. Sadly, despite the legislative changes, the vast majority of people who have defined contribution schemes will, when it comes to retirement, take an annuity with the provider of the scheme. They do not use the facility to shop around. Evidence suggests that someone can get up to 15 or 20 per cent. more than what is on offer from their provider.

Another vehicle that will become increasingly important in the coming years in attacking pension poverty is equity release. Some of us will remember what happened in the early 1990s and, dare I say it, the West Bromwich

[Mr. Terry Rooney]

and, I think, Norwich Union. That was a scandal, but as long as we learn from the past, there is a role and place for equity release, providing people are able to get the proper advice and know exactly what they are getting into.

We have a problem in general in our society with financial literacy. A theme running through our report was the necessity for people who are nearing retirement to get appropriate, accurate and cheap advice on the options that they have to maximise whatever situation they are in. We still have not cracked that. I know that the Department for Work and Pensions have conducted some pilots on money guidance and that the Treasury are doing some things, but we need to pull those strands together so that people can maximise their situation and avoid being in poverty for the want of such advice.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend add to his point the need for independent advice? One of the real difficulties with equity release is that, dare I say it, families are not dispassionately interested in how that equity release might operate. It is not unknown for people either to advise their parents or, more commonly, to get someone they know to advise their parents. Sadly, that is where some of the family disputes come from. Therefore, it is necessary for older people to get genuinely independent advice.

Mr. Rooney: I take my hon. Friend's point. That is not a road that I particularly want to travel, but there have been some fairly scandalous examples of offspring being too eager to get their hands on their inheritance before there is a natural death—I think I will leave it at that.

In considering pensioner poverty, it is important not only to look at the income side but to look at the expenditure side too. There is no doubt at all that schemes such as free bus travel and winter fuel allowance have been major instruments in assisting retired people to reduce their expenditure and thus hold off the onset of poverty. The warm homes scheme itself has improved the heating systems of some 2.5 million pensioner households, through insulation, cavity wall insulation and so on. Again, that has the impact of reducing pensioners' fuel bills.

However, in our report we make the point that retired people are far less likely than the general population to switch their fuel provider. If someone has a basic acumen about the internet, they can switch their supplier online fairly easily, but the elderly are a group for whom that is not the norm. Retired people tend to stick with their supplier, which they may have been with for the past 20 or 30 years. Quite considerable savings can be made by switching supplier and, given that people's income gets lower and more fixed as they get older, the more important those savings are.

There is a long history of pensioner poverty. I am absolutely certain there will be more debates about it in the future. The changes that were introduced post-Turner were meant to ensure that we would have far less pensioner poverty in the future. I do not think that we will ever eliminate pensioner poverty. However, the principal instrument or change that is supposed to be introduced in 2012 is auto-enrolment, so that everybody hopefully would be in some scheme, even if it was only the personal account with a fairly modest contribution of 8 per cent. to it. In that way, everybody would be on the building blocks of the basic state pension and the state second pension, which will continue.

Of course, that excludes people who are not in work. Frankly, all Governments have a pretty poor record of dealing with those people, particularly those with a disability. When somebody at birth has a very severe disability, it is not right to say to them, "You will be poor in childhood, you will be poor in your working age and you will be poor in retirement". Yes, we have built in assumptions that people with a severe disability are contributing to the state pension and the state second pension, but those people will still receive only an extremely modest income in retirement. As we move forward in the coming years, and hopefully as the public finances improve, we need to focus on that area and ask ourselves what we can do better for those disabled people, so that they do not experience a lifetime—from birth to death—of poverty.

2.44 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I want to start by saying what a pleasure it was to serve on the Select Committee during this inquiry. Pensioner poverty is an important subject and, as people can see from the two volumes of the report that were produced and the evidence that went with them, it was a subject that we tackled in considerable depth, with assistance from a range of organisations.

I want to draw attention to four things in the report. The first is recommendation 130, which has already been mentioned by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney). It relates to the Committee's disappointment that there is an unacceptable level of pensioner poverty in some black and minority ethnic communities but pretty little in the way of information that explains why that problem exists and how it can be tackled. Having said that, the take-up of pensioner credit among BME communities must play a crucial part. So I want to echo recommendation 130, which showed the seriousness with which we viewed that issue, and to stress the importance of that recommendation.

Recommendation 199 is particularly helpful. My constituency is relatively close to London compared with the north of England, but it is still a very rural constituency. Of the 75,000 voters in my constituency, I think that only 14,000 live in towns; the rest live in small villages. Recommendation 199 brings out clearly the difficulty for pensioners, particularly pensioners in poverty, of living in a rural area. I think that too often we forget the difficulties that living in a rural area creates—both the extra costs and the physical difficulties of transport. Essentially, in many rural areas people are restricted to using their own transport, as public transport is weak. For example, my own village is considered sustainable on the basis that it has a bus stop, but there is only one bus during the week that takes people to the market to shop and then brings them back a couple of hours later. Of course, that leads to the other side of pensioner poverty in rural areas, which is the isolation that pensioners feel. Obviously, the financial aspect, combined with that feeling of isolation, makes for a sort of double hit on pensioners in rural areas. So recommendation 199 was one that I felt particularly strongly about.

The third recommendation that I want to underline is 315, which refers to the default retirement age. There was huge support for allowing the flexibility that the recommendation calls for. Retirement age must be a judgment for individuals; they must have the flexibility to decide when they retire, so that they can manage their retirement as they have managed their working life. The evidence that we found was that such flexibility was not a particularly onerous burden on employers. We found that people did not want to work for more than one or two extra years, but that the extra time made a big difference to them financially.

The fourth and last point that I want to emphasise is not one of the report's recommendations but the evidence from our visit to Canada. For me, that visit was a particularly useful exercise, because we were impressed with Canada's success story in the last 10 years in reducing pensioner poverty. A number of things struck me about that success story that we might want to think about.

The first was the way in which the Canada pension plan had been funded, or at least part-funded, in the good times. Obviously, the opportunity to do the same has now passed us by and it is unlikely to be a practical option in the future, so it is a source of regret that we did not go down that route.

One of the other things that I was struck by was that the fact that the Canadian pension plan funds were managed on a completely arm's-length basis, unrelated to any contribution that they might have to make to the Canadian economy. They were there to generate as much income as possible to fund pensions. That professionalism came out very strongly.

The last element of the Canadian experience was the recognition that there was no obligation in Canada to purchase an annuity, something about which we have probably all had correspondence from constituents during these recessionary times. The Canadians thought about it in advance and ensured that annuity purchase was not compulsory, a policy that we would like to see enacted for pensions here; I would certainly welcome it.

I stress those three recommendations. The evidence from the Canadian trips usefully brought together a lot of my experience of the matter. It was a useful trip and one that achieved an enormous amount for my own personal education and knowledge. I am grateful to the Committee for allowing me to be a part of it and for choosing this subject.

2.50 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams, and to follow my colleague on the Committee, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), as well as our Chair, whose introduction of the report brought to bear the knowledge that he has developed over the years. There is a lot of important background to the report.

To start on a positive note, I am sure that the Minister was pleased to read in our report that we acknowledge the hard work done by the Government. Pensioner poverty has decreased in recent years. As the Chairman said, we acknowledge the important role of pensioner credit, the winter fuel payment, the increase in cold weather payments and other elements that help pensioners' lives, not least of which is free bus travel. I see many pensioners in my constituency taking advantage of free bus travel and enjoying themselves.

Those things have helped pensioners, but the two recent Pensions Bills have also contained lots of improvements that should help reduce pensioner poverty in future, including the introduction of a credit for carers, a reduction in the number of qualifying years of national insurance contributions to 30—that will help everybody, especially women, to retire with a full state retirement pension—a proposal to uprate in line with earnings and the introduction of new personal accounts. We all want those improvements to happen sooner rather than later so that people get used to saving for their retirement and build up a personal pension pot as well as their entitlement to a state retirement pension.

Nevertheless, the reason for the Committee's report is the fact that we are all too aware that too many pensioners still live in poverty. We set ourselves a comprehensive task. Page 9 of our report sets out the terms of reference, the extent of which shows that the problem has many different angles that need to be considered. We wanted to know what the Department for Work and Pensions was doing to address the issue, but we also wanted to know what specific groups were more vulnerable to poverty in old age.

The terms include the impact of the financial crisis on pensioner poverty. Much of the debate about the global financial crisis has focused on people in work, but it also affects pensioners, some of whom, of course, are also in work. Other issues include benefits take-up, the basic state pension, disability living allowance, attendance allowance and carers' allowance, which all affect the problem. Are lump sum payments such as the winter fuel payment the right way to address pensioner poverty? Also, of course, there is the Government's overall welfare reform programme. That is why the report is comprehensive. We received a huge amount of evidence from a variety of different people.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): I congratulate the Committee on its excellent and comprehensive report. The hon. Lady mentioned a range of issues, including benefit take-up. One problem is that many people—I meet them in my constituency and elsewhere—do not get what they are entitled to, whether through lack of knowledge or due to difficulties filling in forms and all the rest of it. What more can be done to encourage and incentivise people to take up the benefits to which they are entitled rather than losing out on the £5 billion that Help the Aged says older people go without?

Mrs. Humble: The hon. Gentleman raises a key point. My contribution to this debate will concentrate on two areas. The first is simplifying the system, which includes enhancing take-up. One reason for low take-up of some benefits is that pensioners see them as too complicated and do not understand not only individual benefits but how benefits are inter-related. I shall address that issue.

The second issue that I will concentrate on is people in retirement who are carers. More men than women are carers in retirement, and that gives rise to all sorts of issues that we address in the report and which I will talk about in more detail. As the Chairman said in his introduction, we investigated what groups were vulnerable to poverty in old age. They include older pensioners and

[Mrs. Humble]

women, and often older women: those aged 85 and over who did not build up an entitlement to the full state pension, and who often do not take up the benefits to which they are entitled.

Other vulnerable groups include black and minority ethnic and disabled pensioners—again, a lot of pensioners with disabilities do not take up as many benefits as they ought to—carers, whom I will discuss in a little while, and people in care homes. We often forget about those individuals, but their personal allowance for expenses is minimal. We think somehow that everything is provided for them, but it sometimes is not, so we need to remember them as well.

On simplification, it is important that we consider take-up and how to make the system more accessible and understandable for people, both before retirement age and on retirement. We received a lot of information about reasons for non-take-up of pension credit, which are discussed on page 35 of the report. One reason is lack of knowledge. Many people who retire had no contact with the benefit system while they were of working age and have little understanding of what they can claim.

Some people also believe that they are ineligible for benefits, especially owner-occupiers. I represent a constituency with a high percentage of pensioners who are owner-occupiers. Many people who choose to retire to the seaside buy bungalows by the sea. As the Chairman said, when they first retire, they often have a reasonable income, and they furnish their homes and have a nice lifestyle. But 20 years later, that is not always the case, and they do not always realise that they can claim additional support.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne) (Con): The hon. Lady is absolutely right, not least about people retiring to seaside towns. However, I urge her also to make a point about council tax benefit, to which the same considerations apply in spades. It has the lowest take-up of any of the means-tested benefits. My constituency—I am sure that hers is the same—is full of widows who live on their own and own their homes but are cash-poor, but who do not imagine for a moment that they are entitled to any help with their council tax.

Mrs. Humble: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I will come to the issue of council tax and housing benefit in a moment.

People are reluctant not only to claim but to give out personal information. Many pensioners are proud and do not want to talk to people about their financial circumstances. We need to convince them that they ought to, because it involves their entitlement, something that the state thinks that they deserve to have. There is a difficulty, or a perceived difficulty, in claiming and there is a lack of support, particularly face-to-face support. We identified areas of non-take-up of pension credit and we must consider how we can make improvements.

The Select Committee looked at automaticity, although I dislike that word and am sure that there must be a nicer way of putting it. There are automaticity pilot schemes that are looking at whether people have an automatic entitlement. We looked at a pilot in Motherwell in which people who were in receipt of income support were contacted five months before they reached the age of 60. They were asked to arrange a telephone call to claim pension credit. Our recommendations called on the Department to undertake a prompt evaluation of that pilot. The Department said that to bring in automatic entitlement, it might be necessary to change legislation. We all know how difficult that can be. However, adopting the approach of the Motherwell pilot would not require a change in legislation, although it would require work by officials in the Department. I hope we will hear more about that so that we can maximise the ways of simplifying the system. If we can identify the people who should be entitled to pension credit, we should do so. We should be proactive to ensure that those who should get the credit do get it.

The Select Committee considered council tax benefit and housing benefit. The Institute for Fiscal Studies told us:

> "Pension Credit and Council Tax Benefit are the most significant benefits for the 65-and-over age group".

There is a long list of recommendations in the report on increasing take-up. The clear way forward that we identified was having a single phone line for all three benefits. However, the response from the Department said:

> "It will sometimes be more efficient for both the pensioner and the decision-maker to direct the pensioner to the local authority rather than a PDCS phone line."

Why? It seemed to me and the Committee that having a single phone line would be a lot easier for pensioners.

Blackpool council in my constituency works closely with the Department and tries to simplify the interaction between council tax benefit and pension credit. That does not always happen, so we must do more to simplify the process.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I agree entirely that the process should be simplified. I think that Britain is the only country in Europe in which three major Departments are responsible for distributing benefits, and there are agencies below that. I have suggested many times that we ought to combine all benefits in one Department. That would solve the problems of complexity and difficulty for claimants, and save a lot of Government money.

Mrs. Humble: I refer my hon. Friend to the various Work and Pensions Committee inquiries on housing benefit. The Government are considering that issue and perhaps there is a way forward. The Department has a simplification unit that is aware of the complexity of the benefits system and is trying to simplify it. Every time the Committee looks into the matter—as we did in our report on benefit simplification, which suggested ways forward—we find that it is not easy to have a simplified system, particularly a simplified benefits system, because it tends to lead to a broad-brush approach that does not deal with the detail found in people's lives. We must therefore look at compromises. For example, we could respond to people using less detail and ensure that they get as much as they can, rather than have the situation in which some people do not claim and so do not receive anything.

Kelvin Hopkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again—she is most generous. She talks about ensuring that everyone gets the benefits to which they

are entitled ands says that it is simple. Would it not be simpler to have one Department with responsibility for benefits and a one-stop shop that can deal with all of *the details for every person in one place, by one person* and at the same time?

Mrs. Humble: The Committee's reports on simplification, on carers and on tackling pensioner poverty have considered a one-stop shop. The answer is not necessarily to amalgamate everything into one Department, but could be to amalgamate it all into one telephone line or one door that people can walk through so that everything is dealt with together and there is the clearest possible analysis and response to each person's situation by an official.

The second area I want to touch on is carers. "Tackling Pensioner Poverty" refers back to our report on carers because many carers are of retirement age. If ever a system needed simplifying, it is the interaction between the state retirement pension and carer's allowance. I am not the only Member of Parliament to whom pensioners have come, saying that they have applied for carer's allowance and have received letters from the pensions agency saying, "You are entitled to carer's allowance and your reward is £0.00." Do people understand that? Of course not.

Pensioners cannot receive two income-replacement benefits simultaneously. They therefore cannot receive the state retirement pension and carer's allowance at the same time. However, the Government changed the rules a few years ago, so an exception is that people can receive a reduced state pension topped up to the level of the carer's allowance. In general, the two cannot be received together. Despite that, if people want to get the carer's credit, they must first apply for the carer's allowance. That is difficult to explain to some carers.

In the report on carers, the Select Committee came up with the good idea of dividing the carer's allowance in two. The first allowance would be the carer's allowance and the second would be a caring costs allowance that reflected the cost to the carer of the caring work they do. We recommended to Government that the second element, which is not an income-replacement benefit, should be paid whether the carer is above or below retirement age. We returned to that recommendation in the pensioner poverty report. I am pleased to say that the Government did not dismiss the idea out of hand. In response to the report on carers, Ministers said that they would look at carer's allowance as part of an overall review of benefits and benefit simplification. Will they consider it further and give a concrete answer to the problem? If not, pensioners who receive pension credit will continue to not receive carer's credit because they do not want to go through, do not think they have to go through or do not know about the rigmarole of claiming for carer's allowance in order to be told that they cannot have it, but that they can have something else instead.

The Select Committee's reports on carers and pensioner poverty said some very nice things about carers' centres. That relates to the point my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) made about having a single focus. They are a place where people can go to learn about their whole benefit entitlement.

This comprehensive report covers lots of other things, including the issue of disability living allowance and attendance allowance, the default retirement age, which the hon. Member for Henley mentioned, age discrimination, financial advice and choosing the correct annuity. Last but not least, it covers the importance of health and well-being—*many poor pensioners experience ill health.* We need to look at all the issues that affect pensioners. If we can lift pensioners out of poverty, we can help them to lead much fuller and healthier lives. That is why the Committee's report is a good one. I am proud to be a member of the Committee and I fully support our Chairman and the report.

3.10 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. I am glad that we have time to debate these important issues at appropriate length.

I welcome the publication of the report and the speeches in support of it by my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) and for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble). I have to say, however, that we still have not faced up to the fact that the basic state pension and pensioner incomes are simply a disgrace. Compared with the rest of Europe, they are very low indeed, and more than 2 million pensioners still live below the poverty line.

About 10 years ago, a comparison was made of pensions across Europe. At the time, Britain had the absolute rock-bottom basic state pension in the European Union for a single person with no qualifications. The next lowest state pension was in Germany, where people received £150 a week, which was about £60 a week more than in Britain. When I told a group of pensioners, they gasped—they thought that £160 a week was an enormous amount. I said that it was rather less than a Member of Parliament got paid in one day—I had to put it in a context that they would understand. We are still in that situation.

I have to say at this point that I regularly sponsor the annual lobby of Parliament by the National Pensioners Convention and I have publicly supported many of the things that it has said, particularly in the pensioners' manifesto that it recently published.

The reason why we have got away with a low basic state pension is that so many people have benefited from occupational schemes. Indeed, I am in receipt of an occupational pension, even though I am working. Millions of people are in such a scheme. As a result, the low basic state pension has not affected a high proportion of the population, because people receive incomes from elsewhere. Many people also save privately, and private pensions have been another way of cushioning the impact of our disgracefully low basic state pension.

However, occupational schemes are dying; they are being cut off at the knees or are disappearing altogether, and many schemes are preventing new entrants from joining. Occupational schemes will not be there by the time that people such as my children retire, and members of my family who work in the private sector—they are not that well paid, but reasonably well paid—will not have the benefit of an occupational pension, which was something that we could look forward to in the past. Occupational pensions offer guaranteed payments after people retire and even the possibility of retiring early and getting very comfortable payments, but that system is dying and will not be revived.

[Kelvin Hopkins]

I suspect that the real reason why companies introduced occupational pensions, which were not transferable, was to hold on to workers. I am older than almost everybody here, and when I grew up we had something called full employment. Every factory had lists outside of the jobs that people could go in and get—that was certainly true in the south-east, where I grew up. As a result, companies wanted to hang on to their workers, and one way in which they did that was by providing occupational pension schemes. It was the same in local government and the public sector, where pay has often been quite low and people have been attracted into jobs by the knowledge that they will get a decent pension at the end of it. Attacking public sector pensions will not be to our advantage in the long term. With great respect for what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said yesterday, we should look at the problem with private pensions, which are disappearing and being broken down. That is the problem—not the public sector pensions.

On private savings, we have had the Equitable Life scandal. I am a member of the Select Committee on Public Administration, which has supported the ombudsman in calling for those who were affected to receive compensation because regulation failed to protect them. Light-touch or non-existent regulation has led to hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of people losing out. Every year, 30,000 people die who lost out as a result of the Equitable Life scandal.

A high proportion of contributions to private pensions go on advertising and administration. About one third of what would go back to pensioners in a well-regulated state scheme goes to meet just advertising and administration costs, so private schemes are not good value. They are also subject to the vagaries of the stock market and interest rates, so we cannot guarantee that an annuity will be at a particular level, because we do not know what the economic situation will be when the annuity is paid.

The future will not, therefore, be a good private sector or occupational schemes. Increasingly, we will have to rely on a state pension for our fundamental income; indeed, for many working people or those who are unemployed and never have the chance to build up savings, it will be their only income.

The state pension is crucial, but we have seen what has happened to it since Mrs. Thatcher broke the earnings link getting on for 30 years ago. The state pension has dropped from about 26 per cent. to about 16 per cent. as a proportion of full-time earnings—a massive drop in real terms. Had we kept the link to earnings, the figure would now be about 40 per cent. higher than it is, and we could be getting close to the German level of 10 years ago. We still would not be where we should be, but we would be a lot better off. Of course, there would have been more contributions.

Mr. John Baron (Billericay) (Con): I accept that the state pension is important, as the hon. Gentleman says, but could the increase over the past 10 years in the number of pensioners living in poverty not be at least partly attributable to the fact that the numbers claiming housing benefit and council tax benefit have declined? If we could improve the take-up of the benefits that are due, that could help to deal with pensioner poverty and to improve the numbers that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Kelvin Hopkins: Indeed. I should have said that the Government have taken some steps to improve pensioners' lot over the past 12 years, which I welcome. However, those steps have been marginal and, as the hon. Gentleman says, the numbers living in poverty have increased. With a high level of means-testing, however, there will always be these problems. The poorest and least able pensioners—those from ethnic minorities with poor language skills who feel nervous about claiming and who are not used to the system—will lose out. The report refers in particular to Bangladeshi and Pakistani pensioners, who are the poorest of the lot. I have a high proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi constituents, and they live in poverty. At this stage, most of them are young, but as time goes on they will become pensioners. Means-testing is part of the problem. The Government benefit to the tune of £5 billion a year because people do not claim benefits. Constantly urging people to claim benefits and giving help through citizens advice bureaux and advisers will not overcome the basic problem of means-testing. I would like us to move away from means-testing for pensions altogether and towards a much higher basic state pension. We should use the tax system, not means-testing, as a redistributive mechanism.

Mrs. Humble: I refer my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) to page 11 of the report, which points out that the number of pensioners living below 60 per cent. of contemporary median income—the usual relative poverty line—has gone down from 29 per cent. in 1998-99 to 18 per cent. in 2007-08. Each of the three indicators that are used to describe poverty shows that the number of pensioners living in poverty has gone down.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that correction. I may have to look at the statistics more carefully, but the fact is that we still have more than 2 million living below the poverty line, and of course the number of pensioners is increasing. As we live longer, a much higher proportion of people will be of pensionable age. If we do not start to put the system right, and put more into it now, the level of poverty will inevitably increase. We need to do something serious about contributions.

Mr. Baron: I accept what the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) says, but the figures are open to dispute. Help the Aged, for example, would question those statistics, according to the evidence that I have. We must not just bandy figures around willy-nilly. The bottom line is, as the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) says, that the issue remains a key one. We can debate whether there have been slight rises or falls in number, but the simple fact remains: too many pensioners in this country live in poverty, and we must do something to put that right.

Kelvin Hopkins: As the hon. Gentleman says, we could debate the figures and argue about them, and no doubt the National Pensioners Convention has its own figures, although I do not have those to hand.

Had we not broken the pensions-earnings link, we would have solved much of the problem already, but the NPC suggests that to make sure that no pensioner lives below the poverty line we need a basic state pension of £165 a week, which is an enormous increase. Of course, I have suggestions about how we would achieve that. It would mean much greater contributions. However, for the future we must think about radical reforms. With the gradual—even rapid—demise of occupational and private schemes, we must look towards a compulsory state scheme for the long-term future, if people like my children and grandchildren are to have any kind of decent living in old age, assuming that they do not have enormous incomes from which they can save vast amounts.

For an adequate state pension, the NCP talks about £165 a week, and that is a fine place to start. One way in which we could achieve that would be, first, to roll up all the payments that are made at the moment—pension credit and the winter fuel allowance—and build them all into the basic state pension, so that there are not means-tested bits and little add-ons. The winter fuel allowance, much as I welcome it—it is very useful—is said to be targeted on the poor; but actually it is a benefit that is not even taxed, so the rich get it as much as the poor. It is regressive in that sense.

If the winter fuel allowance were to be built into the basic state pension, which, with total income, would be taxed, what was taken from the rich could be recycled to be built into the system at the bottom and help the less well-off. A taxed system is much better than one that is either means-tested or, indeed, not taxed or means-tested at all. I suggest a 54-week year for the payment of the basic state pension, with a double payment in January and December, which would have the same effect of extra income in the winter, when it was needed to help people. Instead of the winter fuel allowance, people would get that double payment in December and January, to overcome the problem, and pensioners would get the extra lump sum that they enjoy so much.

Such an approach to the basic state pension would, however, still mean a fairly basic standard of living for many people. I defy any Member of Parliament to sustain the standard of living to which they are accustomed on £165 a week; nevertheless, a lot of poor pensioners would think it a good start. Still, many people would want to save beyond that. Voluntary saving in the end does not work for many people. The only system that would work would be a compulsory one—a compulsory universal state earnings-related pensions saving system. That is the only way forward.

There would be two elements—the basic state pension and a compulsory state earnings-related pension scheme for everyone. The contributions would be substantial and people would know what they would receive in the end; it would not be subject to economic conditions, the stock market, interest rates or whatever. That is the way forward: voluntarism will not work. People live for today and there are pressures in daily living which mean that they do not save. The amounts that must be saved to provide a serious pension are enormous. People might say, "I'll put away £50 a week." That would not give very much over a lifetime; it would give something, but not enough. Many forecasts have been made about the kind of money that must be paid. Private schemes are inefficient, anyway. The great advantage of a national scheme is that it is easy to administer and very efficient, and we could have a large national savings fund, which could be used for investment purposes and would generate its own income, particularly in public infrastructure, for example. It would be a comprehensive state scheme, with a large fund that would mean that people's pensions were secure for the long term. That is the only serious way forward.

I do not believe that we have yet addressed the problem at all seriously, although I welcome the marginal changes that have been made, and the worthwhile suggestions in the report. We must be much more radical if our children and grandchildren are not to suffer poverty in old age.

3.25 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): I apologise for being late to the debate, Mr. Williams. I am happy to be here to add to what has been said by other members of the Committee who put together the report, and I congratulate the Government on having done a huge amount in the policy area of pensioner poverty. Often when a Government achieve some successes, we pocket them and say, "Thank you very much," and then add, "And what are you going to do for us now?" My remarks this afternoon will be in that mould as well; there are other things that the Government may want to look at.

I endorse the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble), who covered much of the meat of the report. I do not want to repeat all that she said, but there is no doubt that the incomes and lives of women pensioners in particular have been transformed by the Labour Government, especially by the introduction of the pension credit. They are much better off than they were under any previous Government. That is partly because many of them did not qualify for the basic state pension, or had gone through a marriage break-up and so no longer had their husband's contributions to their basic state pension. Also, women live longer, and there is an ageing population of women who, before the Labour Government were elected in 1997, were living on very modest means. I still find, particularly when I visit sheltered housing in my constituency, women who say that they have never been so well off, and that they are very pleased with what the Government have done.

However, the Government have also gone beyond what is in the report in considering the future of women as they reach retirement age. I am very pleased about what was done in the Pensions Act 2007 to ensure that the women pensioners of the future would not be in the same position as those of today—that they will be able to build up national insurance contributions and qualify for the national state pension, and will have an income in their own right. Society has changed and it is no longer good enough for a woman to depend on her husband's pension contributions so that she will have an income. Those practices led to the issue that has never been properly resolved—I do not think that there is a resolution—of married women who paid the small stamp in the mistaken belief that it would not affect the pension they received. Of course, it did not affect them in terms of the 60 per cent. that they received through their husband's contributions, but it did affect their contributions to a pension in their own right.

[Miss Anne Begg]

Those women feel particularly aggrieved when they get a letter from the Pension, Disability and Carers Service telling them that their basic state pension will be 12p a week. They cannot understand it; they have worked all their life and that is what they get—or rather, they get more, because they get the 60 per cent. from their husband's contributions and the 12p, but it still rankles. That was often sold on a false prospectus. Hopefully, the Government's more recent legislation will mean that future generations of women will not face that and will manage, even though they might still have roles as carers. I am glad that the Chancellor announced in this year's Budget that grandparents who look after their grandchildren would qualify for the carers element of national insurance credits. Those provisions are all really important.

I do not intend to speak for long, but I would like draw Members' attention to the personal expenses allowance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood mentioned in passing. I appreciate that it is not the direct responsibility of DWP and that the Department of Health makes decisions on that, but our Committee recommended in another report that the allowance should be doubled. The Government did not quite say no in their response to that report, but they did say that doubling the allowance from £20 to £40 would cost £150 million.

I want to make another plea for an increase in that allowance, not just because my mother is now in a care home so I am slightly more attuned to it, but because there are other people, not just pensioners, who get caught. Some people who live in supported accommodation, who might now be pensioners, are disabled. Where local authorities have cut back on transport, entertainment or day centres, for example, the pensioners and disabled people who live in care homes are now expected to pay for all of their social life, all their clothes, all their toiletries, any presents, hair-dos or anything else out of £20 a week. That really is not enough. It does not give them the dignity to have an independent life.

We must remember that people are living longer and so are sometimes fitter when they go into homes than people in homes have traditionally been, so they expect to go out for a Sunday lunch with their family, for example, but they cannot pay for it. They cannot take their grandchildren out on their birthday because they only have £20 a week to spend. In any case, they could not afford the taxi if they lived in an area controlled by a council like Aberdeen city council, which has taken away their taxi as well. There is a need to address that issue. It is not a huge amount of money, but it could make a big difference to people who have worked all their lives and who are paying high costs for their care. It would be nice if they could hold on to a bit more to spend themselves.

Finally, I would like to ask about council tax benefit. We know that a large number of pensioners are put off claiming because it is a benefit. Those who probably need it most are owner-occupiers, and to them claiming any kind of benefit is anathema. In fact, it is a badge of pride that they have never claimed anything in their life. Sometimes they complain that they get nothing. On that point, I must pay tribute to the Government, because at least we can now say to those pensioners who say they get nothing, "At least you get your winter fuel allowance and your free bus travel."

It is perhaps a slightly different point from that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), because sometimes we have to ensure that the middle classes feel that they are getting something for their money in order for them to pay the tax and help sustain our welfare state. I ask the Minister, when are we going to change the name of council tax benefit? It is almost as simple as that. I understand that the Government are already minded to change the name to council tax rebate, but when will that happen?

Thank you, once again, Mr. Williams, for allowing me to speak in the debate. The Committee members work extremely well together, which is why we have successfully produced a very good report, and I am happy to support it.

3.34 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to take part in this debate on the excellent treatise from the Work and Pensions Committee. I apologise that I have to leave earlier than I had anticipated, because I wish to speak in the debate in the main Chamber, but I will make some brief comments.

I will start with two points of congratulation. One of them is addressed in part to the Department for Work and Pensions and in part to the Treasury. We would have many more pensioners living in poverty had the Government not bitten the bullet and introduced the financial assistance scheme and, latterly, the Pension Protection Fund. We had our arguments when that went through Parliament, but the scheme's benefit is shown when we talk to people who are now receiving moneys after funds to which they had contributed over their whole lives went into administration through no fault of their own. The sums are not necessarily as high as some of us would like, as we believe that they should be fully compensated, but as far as I can tell they are receiving money automatically—I do not like the word "automaticity". That particularly vulnerable group would have every reason to feel let down, principally by their employers, secondly by their trust fund administrator, and thirdly by the Government, potentially, had we not done something about it. That is something the Government ought to be proud of, because it is good news that it seems to be working, and that pride ought to be shared between the DWP and the Treasury, as they overlap on that.

My second point of congratulation, which I have mentioned on other occasions, is for the DWP directly, and I only wish that it would say more about it and take some congratulations. It is about the village agent scheme, which was pioneered in Gloucestershire. The DWP employed people in village areas to go out and proselytise—the aim being to find out whether people were fully taking all that they were entitled to in pension credit and various benefits. Despite criticism in the early days from some people in the localities who thought that those involved were interfering busy bodies, the scheme, which has now been taken on by Gloucestershire county council, because sadly the funding ended, has been an unalloyed success.

I hear nothing but good about what has happened as a result of the scheme. People who had no reason to believe that they were entitled to claim now do so just because someone came round, sat down with them and helped them fill in the forms, asking, "Are you sure you are not entitled to carer's allowance?" For the first time they are receiving benefits that make a great deal of difference. I say to the DWP that when it gets it right it ought to be out there shouting it from the rooftops.

There is the argument about the £5 billion that is not claimed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned. That is why we are going out to try to get people to claim and going the extra mile in rural areas, because the people there are too old or incapacitated to ever go to a citizens advice bureau. Where we have done it, and done it right, let us say so. It might be a relatively small number of people, but they are eternally grateful—I know because I have met them. They are also shocked because they had not realised how poorly off they were. That is often the way—they often do not claim because they do not see themselves as particularly poor, even though they are struggling from day to day.

My third point is not one of congratulation, but of realism. We need to look far closer at the relationship between pensioner poverty and the low quality of life of many of our older residents, particularly in rural areas. The evidence, if Stroud is anything to go by, is that the oldest residents live in the oldest property and, sadly, face the most immense problems with heating and just with the daily grind of getting to the shops and so on. As much as that is to do with quality of life, rather than something we would necessarily term poverty, it is really about what many of our older people face day in, day out.

Kelvin Hopkins: Recent reports suggest that because of fuel price increases, several thousand more pensioners died last year than would have died if the prices had not gone up. We have to do more about fuel poverty in particular. Would my hon. Friend agree?

Mr. Drew: My hon. Friend makes the point only too clearly. I would argue that we have to get much smarter in ensuring that we are targeting not just benefits and credits but help with insulation grants and the boiler replacement scheme announced yesterday, if nothing else. I do not know exactly how that would work; I know that the budget is limited. We are now into a new scrappage scheme. I would like that to go principally to our older people because they are the very people who will not do it—they cannot necessarily afford to do it, but they really need to do it.

I have just a few other comments, although I do not want to speak for long. I entirely support my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North—I am sure that he will be completely unshocked to hear that—on retying the state pension to average earnings. I go along entirely with what he says. I have a question for my hon. Friend the Minister. We are only two and a bit years away from when this is supposed to come in—it is supposed to happen in 2012. The parties are all agreed, although we can argue for perhaps a year either way. One presumes that an immense amount of work is being done to make it happen, yet I have seen relatively little published by the Government about the mechanism for moving to retying, and the effect on pension credits and other benefits. I go along with what my hon. Friend said, but I believe that it will have to be done incrementally, to some extent. In effect, we are trying to turn back the clock how many years? It has been a great many years since the terrible decision was taken to break the earnings link.

I just want to be assured that we will not get to 2012 and then suddenly be told that the work is not done, the computer system is not ready or it is all too expensive, because if there is one thing that will detach pensioners from the voting population, given that they tend to vote in greater numbers than any other group, it is total disillusion over something that they have been promised and have fought for through the National Pensioners Convention and so on. It is now being realised after the political parties have agreed to it, but where is the mechanism by which it will happen?

Much as I agree with what my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said on specific issues, I want to raise what I think is still a great unfairness: the failure to allow disability living allowance to be paid to pensioners who did not claim it when they were of working age. We discussed this during the proceedings on the Equality Bill, and there are hon. Members present who will remember some of those discussions.

We have to come up with a valid reason why we are doing what we are. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) spoke about explaining to pensioners who have not made full contributions why what is happening is happening. The most difficult letters I get are from people who may be slightly over retirement age who have not claimed beforehand but suddenly feel that their disability is such that they need to claim. They are told, "Oh, no, you are entitled to attendance allowance only, and it is always at the lower rate," and so on. We need to see that as an issue.

The most important thing, of course, is mobility. The one thing that pensioners have really benefited from, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) said, is free bus travel, yet if one is in any way incapacitated and unable to get a mobility allowance, that is a somewhat pyrrhic victory as they cannot actually get places. We need to look at that carefully.

My last point is about the retirement age. This is difficult, because we all know that it will probably be increased further by current financial difficulties, but there is great unfairness around the operation of early retirement. I have always argued that there is a fundamental difference between the social classes because people of lower income, unless they go on early retirement for sickness reasons, are highly unlikely ever to be able to retire on such a scheme, whereas all manner of professional classes, whether in the private or public sector, have come up with advantageous packages and are able to go young.

I use my own cousin as an example. I hope that he does not read this. He was a head of department in a secondary school and retired at 50 because of a merger—one of them had to go. In effect, for ever and a day, he is on half his teaching salary with an enhancement. I am sure that nowadays we will have to get much tougher, but there is a hell of a disparity between people who

[Mr. Drew]

retired in the past and who have managed to do quite nicely out of it, compared with people who have had to go on.

We would welcome people going on, given how we attacked the matter in the Equality Bill. We would want to prevent people from not being allowed to go on post-state retirement age, whether it is 65, 66 or whatever. We allow and encourage that, but, for some people, it is not a choice but a reality. They have little or no pension, and they are not able to call on early retirement schemes.

I know the nuclear industry very well. We talk about its liabilities as though they are all to do with horrible stuff that we have to stick in the ground at some time, but they are not all that. Some are human liabilities incurred when the industry had a massive enhancement programme to allow people to go early—to get them off the books, which was considered to be helpful. Compare that with someone who has been in a low-paid job all their life who has to keep going because they have little or no pension.

That is a great unfairness, and the Government should do anything that they can to eradicate the gap, to address the poverty of those who have no choice but to keep going and to make sure that they do not do it when it is completely unfair. We should look at that and do something about it.

3.48 pm

Paul Rowen (Rochdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. I congratulate the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), and the members of the Committee, who have produced an excellent report. It contains a great deal of information and many recommendations that I believe we can all support and accept.

I accept the point made by the Select Committee Chairman at the start of this debate that when one deals with pensions, one inevitably deals with issues that affect different people at different times, depending on where they are in the cycle. Nevertheless, the report mainly deals with pensioner poverty, and, although it deals with other aspects, it deals in particular with those people who are pensioners now.

The hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) referred to the table on page 11 of the report. I believe that there is broad agreement on where we are in terms of pensioner poverty. As the hon. Member for Luton, South said—

Kelvin Hopkins: North.

Paul Rowen: We are all from the north. As the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) said, 2.1 million pensioners, or 18 per cent. of the pensioner population, are still in poverty. The figure rises to 25 per cent. for the over-85s. It is clear in paragraph 17 that, from 1988-89 through to 2004-05, the Government's measures considerably reduced the numbers of pensioners in poverty. In 1998-99, 29 per cent. of all pensioners were in poverty, taking the 60 per cent. median, and by 2004 the figure was down to 18 per cent. It is also clear that in 2007-08, the figure is still 18 per cent. The other figure, which is often taken to be the real poverty line—those who are below 50 per cent. of median income—has not changed as much: it has only gone down from 13 per cent. of all pensioners to 10 per cent. That brings me back to the point that the hon. Member for Luton, North made about means-tested benefits, because those people comprising the 10 per cent.—Age Concern says that it is 11 per cent.—of all pensioners who have been in persistent poverty, below the poverty line, in the past three years are reluctant for one reason or another to claim the benefits to which they are entitled.

The submissions in the report mention many of the reasons for that. For example, pensioners may have a lack of knowledge, may not have contact with the benefits system and may have no history of being in that system. They may believe that they are ineligible for benefits. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned that in respect of his constituency, where people in a particular area did not know that they could claim. There is a general

> "Reluctance to claim a benefit...Reluctance to give out personal information"

or

> "Difficulty or perceived difficulty in claiming".

People often feel that they lack support negotiating the labyrinth.

Kelvin Hopkins: Another major factor is that 20 per cent. of our fellow citizens are functionally illiterate, will use all sorts of strategies to disguise that, and would fear being discovered by having to fill in forms.

Paul Rowen: I agree. That is a clear issue, particularly for many older people.

The issues that I have mentioned also affect people applying for housing and council tax benefit. I welcome the proposal in the report that there should be a single phone line and that the Pension, Disability and Carers Service should work much more closely with local authorities. I also welcome the "automaticity" in the Welfare Reform Act 2009, which the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood mentioned—I cannot say that word, never mind that I do not particularly like it, but she made a good point. Despite 10 years of pension credit, 11 per cent. of people who are entitled to the benefit still have not claimed it, and the sooner we get such a measure up and running, the better.

Age Concern makes a clear, important point. This week in the House we passed the Child Poverty Bill, which sets clear targets and guidelines by which poverty for young people will be eliminated. I have to ask the Minister why can we not do exactly the same for pensioners? Why are they different? There is clearly a lot of merit in making such provision. We know what the problem is. The report answers and deals with some of the things that can be done to go about seriously eradicating that issue. Why are we not setting ourselves the same sorts of targets for older people that we think are appropriate for young people?

On other aspects of the state pension, hon. Members who were involved in consideration of the Pensions Bill will remember that, during its passage, some of us voted to support the principle of having a tie to income by 2012. Again, I agree with what other hon. Members

said. I hope that the Minister gives us a clear commitment: the tie should be not just to average earnings, but to average earnings or the retail prices index. There is an opportunity for pensioners to benefit, depending on inflation and earnings. I would not want to see a shift in that commitment beyond 2005. As Age Concern rightly says, the sums saved by that delay are relatively small: only £200 million a year. Although, in the current financial position, such a sum is relevant, it is not a large sum, given the amounts that the Government are spending. I hope that the Minister will commit to sticking to the deadline. My party is discussing its manifesto today and that matter is on its agenda: we want to be clear that that should happen.

I think that the hon. Member for Luton, North mentioned the National Pensioners Convention's commitment to a citizens' pension. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), the then Pensions Minister the right hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), and I had the pleasure of attending that convention in the Winter gardens in Blackpool earlier this year. I have never been in a cage of lions before, but it certainly felt like that. We know—the hon. Member for Luton, North mentioned it—how angry pensioners feel about the fact that they have not received such a commitment. In the current economic circumstances, I will not say that that can happen right away. However, moves must be made, and certain moves can be made.

Mr. Rooney: This should be an academic debate, because in reality the change to restoring the earnings link is being paid for by equalisation of the pension age. That is the reality of it. So the start date should not really be an issue.

Paul Rowen: I agree. Again, I pay tribute to the Government for reducing the number of years' national insurance contributions that people need to get their entitlement. Last year, only 30 per cent. of women reaching retirement age were entitled to the full state pension. The Government's proposals in the previous two pensions Bills will eliminate many of those problems and ensure that people get what they are entitled to.

The Committee rightly raises the issue of the national default retirement age. It is an anachronism that people are forced to retire at a certain age, whether they want to or not. I cannot see how that national default retirement age can stand alongside an Equality Bill that would treat everyone as equal. It is right that people should have the opportunity to retire at a certain age, but that should not be forced on them.

Kelvin Hopkins: As a younger person I taught in further education. I was under 30, but I taught on a course called "Preparation for retirement". What did I know about retirement? The hon. Gentleman is right. Some people on that course had had hard physical jobs all their lives and they could not wait for 65. However, on the same course there was a legal secretary, a spinster lady, who was in tears because she was going to be forced to retire at 60.

Paul Rowen: I agree. In my constituency, a head teacher who is 74 years of age is still working because the governors of the school, a Church of England school, have agreed that she can do so. But she has had many problems with the teachers' pension scheme in terms of what she is entitled to do. The rules do not allow people like her to work for as long as they want to and are able to. She should be able to defer her pension and take a larger lump sum when she retires. However, that will not be permitted, which is completely wrong.

The Government, with all-party agreement, have set a policy of gradually raising the retirement age over a period to enable those who are currently working, but planning for retirement, to make the necessary provision. I do not want, and my party will not support, an earlier date for that raising of the retirement age. That might be Conservative party policy, but it is certainly not one to which I can subscribe. It would be totally wrong, after agreeing a pensions policy across the political divide, to break it now and to put at a disadvantage people who have made arrangements for their retirement based on what was agreed after the Freud report was accepted.

I want to refer to a couple of other issues that hon. Members raised about entitlements. The disability living allowance is important. If someone is disabled and is given an allowance to take account of the extra costs associated with their disability—Cancer UK is conducting an excellent campaign on extra heating costs—why should they suddenly, at the age of 65, become ineligible for DLA because they have a retirement pension? That is nonsense. I agree with the point that was made about splitting the components, so that the living component is not age-related, and I also accept the point that was made about the Equality Bill. How can someone who is disabled have different needs depending on their age? They either have those needs, or they do not, and they either receive support for those needs, or they do not. Support should not be, as it is at the moment, dependent on eligibility for a pension. Someone who is working would be entitled to DLA, so what is the difference?

Another issue is the attendance allowance. The Green Paper refers to dealing with that as part of the care and support system. Again, we need clarity from the Government, and no doubt there will be an opportunity to pursue the issues when discussing the Bill that is going through the House. That, and the issue to which the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood referred about carers, is important. The Committee's report makes excellent recommendations that I and my party can support.

4.3 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Rowen). We are all excited to hear that the Liberal Democrats are finalising their manifesto. I look forward to reading it, and picking out the undoubted huge contradictions.

I pay tribute to the Select Committee, which has clearly worked hard in a spirit of great amity to produce two excellent volumes. The Committee's distinguished Chairman made an excellent speech with a tour d'horizon of many of the issues, and I apologise if I do not touch on every recommendation—if I did, we would be here for a very long time.

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

I single out the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), who talked about women. With cross-party support, we have gone some way in recent legislation to tackle the historic outrage that less than one third of women receive a full state pension, but we are still left with some cliff edges and so on. However, I will not deal with that in great detail, but not because it is not important.

The debate is taking place against a dark background for pensioners. We have heard that 2.6 million live in official poverty, and 11 per cent. live in persistent poverty. Several speakers touched on the take-up of benefits, and it is tragic that, according to the latest figures, some £5.4 billion of means-tested benefits that are rightfully the entitlement of older people are not claimed. That money is left in the Treasury and does not benefit pensioners. Some estimates are that if all that money were claimed, up to one third of pensioners would be lifted out of poverty. The hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) spoke about means-tested benefits and take-up, and I cannot improve on what she said. The overall answer is that, as Age Concern and Help the Aged said,

"reductions in pensioner poverty have ground to a halt in recent years. It is shameful that, in one of the richest countries in the world, one in five pensioners continue to live in poverty."

That is a challenge not just for the current Government, but for a future Government.

One problem is that the Government do not treat the matter sufficiently seriously. Ministers have a habit of claiming—I have a shrewd suspicion that the Minister here will be no exception—that they are curing the problem of poverty. I shall not take the line of the hon. Member for Rochdale, because I do not believe that a law to abolish poverty, any more than a law to abolish the deficit, is the way forward, because that is just a politician's response to a problem. I hope that he will not be too tearful when I say that I do not agree with what he said about introducing a Bill on pensioner poverty.

Paul Rowen: I accept that, but the point is that there should be targets. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, and would a Conservative Government have clear targets to eradicate poverty?

Mr. Waterson: I certainly think we should have some clear policies on how we will reduce poverty. I totally agree with that, but legislation is not the answer. Legislation on child poverty seems to be merely a reaction to the fact that the Government are clearly missing their existing targets. Targets are one thing, but hitting them is entirely different.

The Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society, said only the other day on the Floor of the House that this is

"the first Government ever to end the link between poverty and old age." [*Official Report*, 7 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 12.]

I shall demonstrate why that is a ludicrous claim, particularly as well over 2 million pensioners still live in poverty.

The fact is that it all depends, as with so many things connected with the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Government, on which statistics are used. Let us be precise. Ministers said at one time that under them pensioners were no more likely than any other part of the population to fall into poverty, but I think the current mantra is that pensioners are less likely than other members of the population to fall into poverty. One might be able to argue that if one set of statistics were used, but using the before-housing-costs income measure the figures are that 23 per cent. of pensioners and 18 per cent. of the population as a whole are in poverty according to the latest figures. So that claim is simply inaccurate, and I hope that it will not be repeated today.

Yesterday was a particularly grim day for pensioners, current and future. First, we had the pre-election con of an increase in benefits next year, to be followed by a cut the following year. The Government have put Tory benefit cuts into their own projections in the pre-Budget report, and it has not taken long for most commentators and most pensioners to see through a blatantly cynical manoeuvre.

Another issue is the yet further delay that was announced yesterday, rather diffidently and quietly, in implementing personal accounts. I shall return to that in more detail in a moment.

The third thing is the dog that did not bark, and the fact that we are still here with no firm commitment on when the Government intend to restore the link with earnings for the basic state pension. That point was touched on by the hon. Member for Rochdale.

I have already spoken in some detail about the pre-Budget report, but let me reiterate that the Government are committed to increasing benefits—which are normally uprated by the RPI—by 1.5 per cent. in April 2010. However, to help pay for that, benefits in 2011 will be uprated by 1.5 per cent. less than the RPI, which is a real-terms cut. That is extraordinary. We are now effectively in an election campaign in which the Government predict, using their own projections and figures, that the next Government will cut benefits and pensions in real terms.

I return to the issue of personal accounts, which are about trying to establish a solution to a problem that we all agree on—those millions of people, mainly middle and low-income earners, who have no existing pension provision. The Government have been talking about the issue since 1998, and the Turner review worked on the basis that the new system would start in 2010. A few weeks ago, an announcement came out of the blue stating that the implementation period for personal accounts would be extended from 18 months to three years. Many low-paid workers, particularly those who work in smaller firms which are at the end of the queue under the present plan, will not get their full employer contribution, or the full benefits of being auto-enrolled into personal accounts, until 2016.

That is bad enough. However, in an interview a couple of days ago, the Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society said that as far as the Government were concerned, it was "full steam ahead" on personal accounts. From that, I assume that she was wholly unsighted of the fact that the Chancellor was about to announce a further delay in the implementation of personal accounts. As we know, a significant delay was announced yesterday. The delay is not in the commencement—personal accounts will still commence in 2012, but quite what will happen is a bit of a mystery. I suppose that one person might be auto-enrolled into personal accounts by 31 December

2012. Who knows? Something will happen in 2012, but it will be 2017 before employers are required to pay the full rate of contribution. Until then, the rate of contribution will be 1 per cent.

All sorts of problems are associated with that. It is bad news for Turner's target audience—those on low or medium incomes—who need to save for their retirement. It means several years at least of a sort of planning blight, during which people will not be making or receiving full contributions, or making any other arrangements for their retirement. It will be a period of contributions and benefits that they will never be able to make up over their working lives.

The Association of British Insurers said that the Government admit that

"this delay will save £2.4 billion".

The delay has nothing to do with the efficient introduction of personal accounts, or trying to avoid what has been called "a terminal 5 moment" in introducing them. We have always accepted that there should be no big bang in introducing such a measure, and we always accepted a period of around 18 months for its introduction. However, this has nothing to do with that; it is about saving the Treasury £2.4 billion.

The ABI goes on to say:

"This money will be saved at the expense of getting the low-paid into long-term pension saving which is absolutely vital for the future welfare in retirement of the workers of today. The Government's changes to the timetable will mean that employers joining the scheme in 2012 will be able to pay just 1 per cent. contribution for a full four years with Government backing. This will create a dangerous incentive for employers to join the Government's scheme and level down from the typical private sector Defined Contribution scheme of over 6 per cent. This will lead to a fall in overall savings levels for the employees affected."

We are looking at potential pensioner poverty in the future as a result of this measure.

Tom McPhail, from the financial advisers Hargreaves Lansdown, has said:

"This move is all about sacrificing the long-term interests of people's retirement plans for the sake of digging themselves"

—that is the Government—

"out of a hole the economy has got into."

Our position is clear: this is yet another setback to rebuilding savings and pensions in this country. The Government have already been forced to delay the scheme's implementation, by phasing it in over several years. Now, we find out that the 3 per cent. employer contribution will not be reached until October 2017. Yet again, it is low and middle-income earners who will pay the price for Labour's debt crisis, with the delays taking £2.4 billion out of the pension pot.

All that is against a background of existing damage to final salary schemes. Active membership of final salary schemes has halved since 1996, and there have been problems associated with the Pension Protection Fund and the financial assistance scheme, which the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) referred to. There have been considerable problems in getting compensation for people in all the schemes that have collapsed since 1997, which at the same time undermines people's confidence in the process of saving for retirement. That is the key to all this; we must make it worth while for people to save for their retirement. If some experts are right, and one in four babies born today will live to see their 100th birthday, a potential king-sized problem of pensioner poverty looms in the future, as we try to pay for many years of retirement, far more than we have at the moment.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman rightly says that occupational schemes are declining. Is it completely unrealistic to expect people voluntarily to save the sort of amounts that will be required in order to have a decent pension in old age? Does he have a serious alternative to my state scheme proposal, which would be efficient and would work?

Mr. Waterson: As the hon. Gentleman might imagine, we are a bit dubious about any state-based solution. However, we think that auto-enrolment harnesses inertia—that is the problem; people are not interested in finding out the options. Furthermore, apart from not being a very conservative thing, straightforward compulsion means forcing people to do something that might not be in their best financial interests. A huge question mark hangs over personal accounts regarding the interaction of means-tested benefits.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): Would the hon. Gentleman repeal the legislation introduced by the Government in 2007-08, which enacts automatic savings and places a savings obligation on all employees? Is that what he means when he says that he does not want a state-based solution to encourage savings?

Mr. Waterson: I was saying that I did not want the state-based solution proposed by the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins). I am not saying that we would repeal that legislation. Let me be precise: we are in favour of automatic enrolment. We were in favour of it before the Turner review or personal accounts were dreamt about. It was in our last election manifesto, and we are signed up to the Turner consensus which, as far as I am concerned, includes an easy-to-access, cheap pensions saving vehicle for people who do not have pensions at the moment. Whether that is precisely the right model is another matter. We have said that if we win the election, we will review how far the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority has got with designing personal accounts, and I have mentioned one or two of the issues that the review would cover.

Paul Rowen: The hon. Gentleman says that he is wedded to the Turner consensus. Does that also mean the retirement age, and the agreement that there will be a progressive raising of the retirement age?

Mr. Waterson: I was coming to that issue, but I shall deal with it now. We think that anyone who tinkers with the Turner consensus does so at their peril. It was a painfully achieved consensus, and is the only game in town as far as long-term pension reform is concerned. The shadow Chancellor felt able to bring forward the timetable for raising the state pension age because Lord Turner has subsequently said that he wished he had been more radical. That is our reason for the line that we take, which I know is different from that taken by the hon. Gentleman's party.

I have a couple more points. Decumulation is a dreadful word, but it is an important issue that one or two people have touched on. People must know more

[Mr. Waterson]

about the choices that are available to them as they approach retirement, particularly those about finding a better deal for annuities—the open market option, or OMO as it is called.

To return to the point made in the last intervention, it is important to have good thinking about whether people choose to work longer. Already, 1.3 million people are working beyond the state pension age. There are problems with the default retirement age. The situation is particularly bad in parts of the public sector and particularly local government, where as soon as someone is 65, it is goodbye. Many people resent that. Those points were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and by the hon. Member for Rochdale.

There are benefits from working longer. Boosting incomes is an obvious one. There are many health benefits for some people. There are clear issues about longevity, physical jobs and so on that need to be examined, as I am the first to accept. It is a question of choice, but it is a good way of boosting incomes, apart from the other benefits to be had. Of course, one of the things that we did—in the Pensions Act 2004, I think—was to allow people to defer their state pension for five years and take a lump sum. That is one of the best deals around, as far as I can make out, as long as people are around to collect it.

I have a final quick thought on restoring the earnings link. The hon. Member for Luton, North particularly talked about that, as did other hon. Members. The Select Committee recommended that it should happen in 2012. My understanding is that the Government are currently committed to it happening some time in the next Parliament, if they are in power. It is about time that they came up with a specific promise on that.

This has been a bad few days for the Government's flagship policies. Tuesday saw the imploding of their Green Paper on social care. Yesterday saw a further undermining of personal accounts and pensions policy generally. This Government, like their flagship policies, are holed below the waterline and it is time for a fresh start.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr. Williams. I apologise on behalf of my hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society, who obviously has responsibility for this area of policy. Because of the combination of the timetabling of this debate with the uprating statement in the main Chamber, she was unable to be here, so I am speaking on behalf of the Government on this matter today.

I congratulate the members of the Work and Pensions Committee on an excellent and, as has been noted already, extremely comprehensive report on pensioner poverty. In particular, I congratulate the Chairman of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), who once again brought to the discussion not just his huge knowledge, but his great commitment to the people affected by the pensions and benefits system. He began by reminding us of the position as set out by Sir William Beveridge. Of course, he is absolutely right: Sir William Beveridge always envisaged that the state pension would be supplemented by people's own savings—by people taking responsibility for themselves.

The reforms that the present Government have introduced in the Pensions Acts of 2007 and 2008 are among the most significant reforms of pensions legislation that any Government have undertaken since the second world war. They will deliver a fairer and more generous state pension. As a result of the reforms, three quarters of women reaching state pension age in 2010 will be entitled to a full basic state pension, compared with less than half now. The introduction of auto-enrolment will result in between 5 million and 9 million people newly saving or saving more for their retirement. Those are fundamental changes in our pensions system, which will allow people to take more responsibility for themselves.

The 2007 Act provides a fairer and more generous pension. The changes will help to tackle the historical inequalities in the state system—in particular, by reducing to 30 the number of qualifying years that people need for a full basic state pension for both men and women. The Government have made it clear that we will restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings. Subject to affordability and the fiscal position, that will begin in 2012 but will in any case be completed by the end of the next Parliament.

Paul Rowen: I am interested in the Minister's comments about beginning in 2012 and ending within the Parliament. Could she clarify what she means by that?

Helen Goodman: We have said that we will do it at some point from 2012 but in any case by the end of the next Parliament. That is the position that the Government take.

We are replacing home responsibilities protection with a new system of weekly credits for those pensioners receiving child benefit for children up to the age of 12, approved foster carers and those who spend at least 20 hours a week caring for severely disabled people. That is to ensure that there is provision through the state system for those whom the Committee has identified as the ones who are particularly liable to suffer pensioner poverty.

From 2010, an extra 1 million people will build up entitlement to the state second pension. Uprating the basic state pension in line with earnings from 2012 should roughly double its value by 2050, compared with the value if current uprating policies continued.

Kelvin Hopkins: Although I welcome that, as I am sure we all do, the reality is that the slippage since 1980 has been so substantial that there should also be substantial increases in the pension—not just the re-linking with the earnings index but substantial increases—to compensate for what has been lost.

Helen Goodman: I intended to finish by saying something about the general record of the Government, but as has been pointed out to my hon. Friend by other hon. Members, the fact is that by introducing the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit, the Government have lifted 900,000 pensioners out of poverty in the past 12 years. I am sorry about the fact that the previous Administration cut the earnings link, but it would not

be realistic for the present Government to undo what was done more than 30 years ago, within the timetable that my hon. Friend seems to be suggesting.

Kelvin Hopkins: I have some figures from 2007; I agree that they have changed slightly since then. The figures, from Aon Consulting and published in *The Guardian*, show the UK at the bottom of the European league table, with the European average for the basic state pension at 60 per cent. of average working pay and ours at just over 30 per cent. In terms of making up that gap, even the National Pensioners Convention figure would still be below the EU average.

Helen Goodman: It is misleading to focus on the state pension alone. I think that my hon. Friend was referring to the OECD report published in June. That report shows that the replacement rate for the average earner, taking account of private pension provision, rises to 70 per cent., which is above the overall OECD average. The European Commission's report on social protection and social inclusion this year showed that the median income of those aged 65 and over in the UK rose from 15 per cent. below the EU average in 1997 to 9 per cent. above it in 2007. So my hon. Friend should give credit where it is due.

Let me say a few words about the Pensions Act 2008. For the first time, all employers will be required to contribute a minimum of 3 per cent. to an eligible employee's workplace pension scheme. That will supplement the 4 per cent. contribution from the employee and about 1 per cent. from the Government in the form of tax relief. It is planned to introduce from 2012 a new low-cost saving vehicle—the personal accounts scheme—aimed at employees who do not have access to a good-quality work-based pension scheme. In the main, those are median to low earners.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), suggested that this week there had somehow been a U-turn, or at least an S-bend. That is absolutely not true. The starting date for automatic enrolment is unchanged; it was always planned to be October 2012, and it is still planned to be 2012. Implementation was always intended to be staged, and it is still intended to be staged. We will announce in January the details of our full implementation path, in response to the consultation that we have undertaken.

I shall move on to the position of women in the pension system, because they were one of the key groups that the Select Committee identified as facing particular problems. Of course, the most important thing that has been done in the past 12 years is the introduction of pension credit, which means that pensioners need not live on less than £130 a week. Almost 60 per cent. of recipients of that credit are single women. As a result of the reforms that we have introduced, around three quarters of women reaching state pension age in 2010 will be entitled to a full state pension, compared with around half who would have been entitled without the reform, and the figure will have risen to more than 90 per cent. by 2025. Reforms in the Pensions Act 2008 will provide equality of opportunity for male and female workers to build up a private pension, thus tackling the long-term problems from which women in this country have suffered in the past two generations. We estimate that around 3.5 million to 4 million women will be eligible for automatic enrolment in a workplace pension scheme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North also raised the issue of people disabled in early life becoming poor old people—having a life totally lived in poverty. It is certainly true that that group has a high risk of living in poverty, but I would like to point to a number of policies that the Government are implementing that are intended to—and do—help to mitigate that situation. First, the gap between the employment rate of people with disabilities and that of the rest of the population has been falling, and that means that people with disabilities are able to build up their contributions record, which is what they need for their pension. Further to that, we have introduced reforms to the state pension, ensuring that more people with disabilities can build up a state second pension, as well as the credits for a full pension.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) pulled out a number of issues from the report. The first one he talked about was the position of pensioners in rural areas. One of the things that the Government have done to support people in rural areas is to introduce free bus passes. I do not know the Conservative party position on that or whether it intends to maintain free bus passes.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful for the opportunity to confirm that we are great supporters of concessionary bus fares for pensioners. We think that they have been liberating for pensioners, and have been a great success. I have only one caveat, which I suspect is shared by the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood. That caveat is that places such as seaside resorts end up spending a great deal of council tax payers' money running the buses, because the Government announced that bus travel was going to be free, but that did not come to pass in areas of high usage of bus passes, of which seaside resorts are a good example. The financing needs to be looked at, but we are great fans of the scheme and intend to continue concessionary bus travel.

Helen Goodman: I am sure that that is very welcome. The hon. Gentleman has not made it clear whether it will be financed by council taxpayers or from central taxation.

Issues relating to rural areas were also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). A large amount of work has been done to support take-up campaigns in rural areas and they have been, as my hon. Friend said, extremely successful.

The hon. Member for Henley also asked about poverty among black and ethnic minority groups. The Department is absolutely conscious of the need to address that problem, which is why the Pension, Disability and Carers Service has specific take-up campaigns for those groups, and is addressing the issue energetically at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North also talked about the importance of equity release and the quality of advice that people receive. The Government are extremely supportive of innovations that promote independence and well-being in later life, and our aim is to provide a well-functioning market in that area. More than 90 per cent. of that market is now regulated by the safe home income plan of the UK industry body for

[Helen Goodman]

equity release. He also talked about the importance of good-quality financial advice and information. Services such as money guidance and the one-stop shop must gain public trust to be fully effective, and that is why we are working with the voluntary sector. We are working with Citizens Advice and Age Concern, and have some pilots in the north-east. Those groups already have the confidence of the communities and are, therefore, extremely effective not just in giving independent advice but in being understood to give it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) talked about the position of the personal expenses allowance and her desire to see it increased to £40 from £21. Her concerns were echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg). As colleagues from other Departments have pointed out on previous occasions, although that is a worthy objective, it would be extremely expensive, and at the moment the Government's priority is to concentrate on improving the quality and level of social care. I cannot, therefore, offer an immediate solution to the problem that my hon. Friends have raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) questioned why we were encouraging a system for pensions for the long term that was not simply state provision. That question really was answered by the Chairman of the Select Committee in his opening remarks. Surely the key point here is incentives. We have to set up a system that rewards people who have saved and encourages people to save for the future, and to do that alongside providing—which we have done—a minimum income guarantee, which enables people to have a proper and dignified old age.

Kelvin Hopkins: There is a constant emphasis on voluntarism. Many countries in Europe have compulsory contributions by employers and employees, and any attempt to tamper with that sees demonstrations in the streets, as has happened in France. What is wrong with a compulsory state system? If people who are very rich want to save on top of that, fine, that is not a problem at all. They would not be means-tested because there would be no means-testing in the system.

Helen Goodman: I think that my hon. Friend is calling for the Pensions Act 2008, which we have already implemented and which provides for automatic savings.

Several hon. Members have talked about the importance of the default retirement age, the introduction of which in 2006 was a significant step forward. For the first time, it meant that people had the right to remain in work until the age of 65. Proposals to raise or abolish the default retirement age will clearly need consensus between employers and employees for it to work properly. It is not the sort of thing on which we can change our minds, rewriting legislation every couple of years. That is why we are reviewing the matter.

Many Members spoke about the importance of take-up, and asked what we were doing to improve it. The significance of take-up can hardly be underestimated. That is why, every week of the year, the Pension, Disability and Carers Service undertakes 13,000 visits to pensioners. Earlier this year, my hon. Friend the Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination, then a DWP Minister, wrote to nearly 250,000 recipients of pension credit about the passporting of benefits such as council tax benefit.

The importance of ensuring that no stigma attaches to people who claim benefits is well understood. That is why, following a campaign by the Royal British Legion, the Government amended the Welfare Reform Bill a few weeks ago—it has now been enacted—to take the power to rename council tax benefit "council tax rebate".

Since November 2008, people have to make only one telephone call to claim pension credit, housing benefit and council tax benefit. We have also removed the need for people to give a signature, which was unnecessarily bureaucratic.

Paul Rowen: Will the Minister confirm whether there are still 0845 numbers, or are calls now totally free?

Helen Goodman: I am sorry, but I do not know. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

The majority of housing benefit and council tax benefit recipients are passported from pension credit. That is why we believe that it is right for the PDCS to remain the first port of call for such benefits.

Mr. Waterson: The Minister told us that the power had been taken in legislation to change council tax benefit to council tax rebate. When will it happen?

Helen Goodman: It will happen as soon as is practicable. It is obviously a complex matter. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the fact, but council tax benefit and housing benefit are administered by local authorities, so it is not completely under the control of the Department for Work and Pensions. We need to set up a system that everyone can operate; computer systems will have to be changed and so on, and that cannot be done overnight.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood asked about automaticity. A national pilot will take place over six months during the next financial year to test how the concept works. I hope that it will provide the opportunity to build the evidence base necessary to support consideration of how we might use the information that we hold at the moment to increase take-up while minimising fraud and error. It is important that we have tight data-sharing systems, so that people can be sure that information that they give to one arm of government is used for appropriate purposes and does not get lost.

My hon. Friend asked about an adviser hotline, with only one telephone number. We now have a dedicated pension centre liaison officer in every pension centre. That person has a separate, dedicated phone number. We hope that that service is effective. It is bedding in at the moment, and we will evaluate it to ensure that it works properly everywhere.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the needs of carers. The Government have taken a number of steps to improve the position of carers. The first will benefit them disproportionately—it will benefit them more than most groups. It is the decision to reduce the national insurance contributions requirement to 30 years. One reason why carers do not have full contribution records is that they have been out of the workplace caring for relatives.

Secondly, from April 2010, we will introduce the carers credit; people will be credited with NICs if they are caring for a member of the family for at least 20 hours a week. Thirdly, we have enabled people over the age of 65 to receive the carers allowance, although it will be offset against their basic state pension. As a result, they will receive an extra £30 a week. That is significant for the quarter of a million people who are entitled to it.

One thing that really concerns people of working age is that they should be able to combine their caring responsibilities with a job. We are therefore having people trained to ensure that every jobcentre has someone on the staff who understands the needs of carers and can advise them specifically on finding work that will fit with their caring responsibilities. My colleagues in the Department of Health have done much to improve the availability of respite breaks.

My hon. Friend pointed out that the administrative arrangements for applying for carers allowance in order to qualify for the additional pension credit, even if unsuccessfully, is not quite the model of streamlined government that one would expect in the 21st century. We have said, and I reaffirm it today, that we will look carefully at the Committee's proposals for carers in the long term. We are also considering how to improve the process in the shorter term for pensioners in receipt of pension credit, in order to make it more straightforward. As I said about housing and council tax benefits, there are IT issues, but we wish to address them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud spoke about the quality of life of pensioners. In addition to enhancing the pension, the Government have introduced bus passes, free swimming, support for the television licence fee and the Warm Front scheme; and we have maintained the level of the cold weather and winter fuel payments this winter. On Monday this week, the Energy Bill received its Second Reading; it will introduce social tariffs, from which poor pensioners should benefit.

I turn to the question of why we do not have targets for pensioner poverty like those that we introduced for child poverty. Essentially, we come back to the incentives point that I made earlier. The fact of the matter is that, in most cases, pensioners have had the opportunity to take actions to enhance their income in retirement. We want to set up a system that removes the barriers to people doing that, which is why we have placed such emphasis on the changes to the rules for carers and women who have had particular difficulties because the rules were not structured to acknowledge their different life patterns. Moreover, the system should be forward-looking so that we provide incentives for the future. That is the essential difference between pensioners and children.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne concluded with a speech of such negativity that I wondered whether we were living in the same country. The benefits uprating statutes normally link benefits to the retail prices index. Although the September RPI was minus 1.4 per cent., the Chancellor has decided to increase the basic state pension by 2.5 per cent. from April next year, which is almost a 4 per cent. increase in real terms. He has increased other benefits by 1.5 per cent., which means bringing forward 1.5 per cent. of the following year's increase. There is no question of a cut in benefits under the Government's plans for April 2011. That can be clearly seen in the Green Book, and in table B4 in particular. Paragraph 5.19 states:

> "To provide additional support to households during the early stages of economic recovery, the 2009 Pre-Budget Report announces that the Government will bring forward a proportion of the increases expected in April 2011 a year earlier, thereby providing a 1.5 per cent increase next April for those benefits and tax credits normally uprated by RPI. In April 2011, rates will be increased by the remaining amount necessary to make up the difference with the RPI for September 2010. This locks in the real increase that arises from not reducing benefits next April, but avoids a further permanent increase in expenditure that would reduce the amount available for frontline services in the next spending review."

I hope that that clarifies the fact that the Chancellor, instead of freezing rates, which he had the opportunity to do, has chosen to protect pensioners in this country to enhance their incomes in real terms. This year, we will be spending more than £13 billion more on pensioners than we would have done if the policies that were in place in 1997 had continued.

A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation described an historic reversal in the fortunes of pensioners over the last decades, with people over state pension age now the age group at the lowest risk of poverty.

I hope that the Government and the Select Committee can continue to maintain a constructive relationship as we move forward to address the serious issues that pensioners face in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

4.53 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 December 2009

[MR. PETER ATKINSON *in the Chair*]

Health Care (Buckinghamshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr. Watts.)*

9.30 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Atkinson? I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise concerns about health services in Buckinghamshire, particularly in Chesham and Amersham.

When I applied for the debate, I did so not only in the interests of my constituents, but on behalf of my colleagues who are sitting here with me. I was the lead name for the debate, but I applied for it on behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman), and of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve). Unusually, I will also make some remarks on behalf of the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) who, as you know, Mr. Atkinson, presides over the House and is unable to participate in such debates. Nevertheless, he feels just as passionately as we do about health services in Buckinghamshire and, with your permission, Mr. Atkinson, I have some speaking notes that I intend to deploy on his behalf.

I welcome the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), who speaks on health matters for the Conservatives, to the Chamber. I am delighted to see the Minister, because we did some sterling work together during the course of this Parliament on the Autism Act 2009. When that provision was just a raw Bill, the Government, in the shape of the Minister and his colleagues, chose to oppose it. However, with persuasion and after winning the vote on Second Reading, the Minister and his colleagues saw the light.

We were able to exhibit—and I say this in a spirit of generosity to all the other parties—the House at its best and put an Act in place. I give notice to the Minister that in the interests of my constituents in Buckinghamshire I shall be holding his feet to the fire. I am looking forward to a wide and thorough consultation on the Autism Act, which will be part of our health care service. I hope that the Minister will bring the enlightenment that he eventually brought to the debate on the services provided to people with autism to this debate, which covers the wider health care services in Buckinghamshire.

After more than a decade with Labour in power, it is fair to say that the NHS in Buckinghamshire is facing a crisis. We have called this debate to find out just what the Minister and the Government are going to do about that. There is no time for warm words; the stark reality is that the health service in Buckinghamshire is fast approaching breaking point.

Buckinghamshire has one of the lowest-funded NHS systems in the country: it receives some 17 per cent. less per head than the UK average. Last year, we had the only primary care trust with a deficit of some £7.5 million. Although we have relatively good health, we have only average care—those are not my words; they are the words of health care management professionals. Are we 17 per cent less in need or 17 per cent. healthier than other areas? I think not. Sadly, we have poor dental access and poor ambulance times, because of the size of the county. We also have a higher number of delayed hospital transfers and an ageing population. All our constituents are living longer, so the disparity between the formula that is adopted and the outcomes is starting to widen and become greater. I believe that my colleagues may allude to that matter in more detail.

The financial situation is becoming dire. I believe that the Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust must find an efficiency saving of 3 per cent. annually, which is some £11.5 million. In addition, the PCT is now paying the hospitals trust at 25 per cent. of the tariff for the rest of the year for over-performance against most in-patient and follow-up out-patient work, which adds another £5.2 million of income loss and takes the total savings that have to be found to about £17 million by the end of March.

In fact, in Buckinghamshire, we are unable to fund the care records service, which amounts to some £2.4 million, or Maternity Matters, which is about £700,000. Our health service leaders have had to pull together a summit plan—in other words, an emergency plan. Given the hospitals trust's financial position and the PCT's structural deficit, more than £20 million has to be taken out of the health service in Buckinghamshire between now and the end of the financial year.

Remedial action has been taken to try to plug that gap. Attempts are being made to curb our urgent care demand, and our health service is aiming to make 100 fewer admissions a week and reduce the number of accident and emergency attendees by 30 per cent. I must tell the Minister that, after my last meeting with the hospitals trust, there is no indication that there have been any major shifts in that pattern at all, which means that the projected cost savings will not be made. We are also trying to reduce our GP referrals to hospital by 50 a day.

Our GPs and other NHS staff are working like Trojans to see more patients, as well as offering community services and trying to reduce the elective and out-patient demand. They are trying to balance the books, but they are doing so against almost impossible odds. We are trying to move from one model of care to another far too rapidly, which is causing big problems. One could consider the scarcity of funds to be a positive challenge—indeed, many people who work in health service do, because they regard the glass as half full, not half empty. In the long term, we all want better care closer to home, and we want people to receive the right treatment at the right time. I believe that the administrators who head up our services are doing the very best that they can to deliver them. However, what we are experiencing on the ground is the alarming effect of a pace of change that is almost impossible to achieve. Buckinghamshire will be the first area virtually to tip over, not least because of the historical financial deficit.

Clinics at Amersham hospital have been dramatically reduced, with many moving to Wycombe or Stoke Mandeville. That causes great difficulties for people who travel to get treatment. I can honestly say that

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

some of the letters I have received are absolutely heart-breaking. Many of my elderly constituents find the journeys and the confusion of the changes almost impossible to deal with. Overall, more than 60 per cent. of the clinics can be maintained, but that means that there is a 40 per cent. reduction, which is an enormous drop by anyone's standards.

The PCT has given notice to providers of primary counselling services that their services will end early next year, which, when combined with other cuts to Mind centres and the managed services, means most of the counselling services in Buckinghamshire will be removed in the very near future. Our ambulance services, which do a fantastic job, do not operate on a level playing field. The per capita allocation of NHS funds reduces payments to the so-called affluent areas, such as ours. However, the cost per capita of providing ambulance services is much higher than in urban areas, which puts even more pressure on the service in Buckinghamshire.

With our services operating under such pressure, I am concerned about what will happen if we are hit by a flu epidemic and a harsh winter. Our senior managers have a mandatory duty to break even and deliver on budget, but they are not going to do so if it means jeopardising patient safety. There is a real possibility of a major problem if we are hit by a flu epidemic. I have been told by our senior personnel that the board of Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust takes seriously its responsibility for the stewardship of our finances, which ultimately are funded by the taxpayer, but that its commitment to patient safety and the quality of services is its top priority. That means, in my language, that our health care professionals—they cannot say this, but I can—will put people before their budgets and their careers, and that is true dedication. However, the years of unfair funding for Buckinghamshire are now coming home to roost. If there is a crisis this winter, what will the Minster do to help to deliver health services in Buckinghamshire, which are stretched to breaking point, to our constituents?

I understand that we in Buckinghamshire are not alone in feeling the effects of the unfair funding and that similar effects are being felt in Hertfordshire, Berkshire, Hampshire and, indeed, Oxfordshire. Perhaps the Minister would confirm that many of those areas are approaching a financial crisis. I believe that the financial crisis is felt right across our area, and I am certainly not convinced that the advent of the South Central strategic health authority, which was formed on 1 July 2006, has helped. The fact that that authority has had not one, but three chief executives in that time has hindered, rather than helped the situation—it brings a whole new meaning to the word "continuity". However, I understand that that strategic health authority has reserve funds squirreled away, so perhaps the Minister would tell us the extent of those funds, which I understand could run to £30 million-plus, and how we can access them to alleviate the problems faced by my constituents and others across the county.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I would like to make a few points on behalf of the right hon. Member for Buckingham, who has some specific concerns about his constituency. He has been contacted by several constituents concerned about the threat to mental health services and by people who are worried that the range of services might be reduced as a result of the planned review. He believes that the PCT might be planning to invest solely in cognitive behaviour therapy and wants reassurance that other forms of therapy will be recognised and receive investment.

The right hon. Member for Buckingham is also concerned about Buckingham community hospital, where doctors and patients are worried about the new contract and are concerned that the reduction in the number of hours of care would be detrimental to the hospital. That has already caused the transfer to Milton Keynes of patients who would have been treated in Buckingham community hospital. I understand that there is much anger about the downgrading of the community hospital among his constituents, and fears among the staff, who feel that the new arrangements are worse. Under previous arrangements, GPs could continue to visit their patients, but that is no longer the case. It is essential that the need for budget cuts does not result in a second-class service for the residents of Buckingham and the surrounding area.

Although unable to speak on the matter, the right hon. Member for Buckingham is no less concerned than my colleagues, who will speak in this debate, and me about the resources available for providing proper health care through the NHS to our constituents. I am sure that his comments would mirror some of my earlier remarks. I am particularly worried about the effect on NHS staff in Buckinghamshire. I have had talks, as have my colleagues, with the chief executive of the hospital trust and I know that it will try to reduce any redundancies to the absolute minimum. However, it has had to establish employee assistance and a redeployment bureau. Consultations with affected staff, although under way, mean that many of our dedicated personnel in the health service now fear for their jobs as we approach the Christmas season.

I therefore ask the Minister not to put on the rose-tinted glasses of office when he responds, but to realise that with our existing structural budget deficit, the need for productivity improvement, the financial downturn and the fact that Buckinghamshire received 17 per cent. less funding than the national average, we have an ever-increasing problem that will not go away. To deliver in this financial year and just break even, the cost improvement programmes equate to stripping out about £35 million in total. That would be asking a lot of any health service in any part of the county, but it is especially true in our area, where the demand is so high.

What is particularly worrying is that the problem will be exacerbated in future. With a forecast increase of only 5.1 per cent. next year and little or no increase in the budgets thereafter, there will be reductions in funding in real terms, which will mean real cuts to our health service that cannot be concealed or dressed up by fancy words. They will come as a result of the actions that have been taken by the Government in power at the moment. Will the Minister tell me how he can help us in this financial year, how he will ensure that people in Buckinghamshire continue to receive a high-quality, safe and accessible health service and how it will be sustainable in future years? I am sure that he would not want his legacy in government to be the fact that people in Buckinghamshire do not get a decent national health service. I hope he can rise to the challenge and will not produce the usual official script.

9.46 am

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on securing the debate. I should also declare an interest in two respects. Since I might refer to mental health services, I declare that I am an honorary vice-president of Buckinghamshire Mind. I should make it clear, moreover, that my family and I have been using local health services in the county throughout my time as a Member: all my four children were born at Stoke Mandeville hospital and, because of family illness, I have had occasion to visit the accident and emergency department at Wycombe general hospital, and both the accident and emergency and in-patient wards at Stoke Mandeville hospital within the past 10 days.

My hon. Friend set out clearly in her speech the financial challenge the local NHS faces. Some of the problems we have faced over the years in persuading officials and Ministers to take those challenges seriously arise from the misleading impact of average statistics for the country, which show Buckinghamshire as being prosperous, healthy and therefore able to cope with significantly less than the average per capita funding for England. Of course, those averages sometimes conceal the fact that there are certainly pockets of poverty, both in Aylesbury and in High Wycombe, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) will say later. Certainly, anyone who visits Southcourt or Quarrendon in my constituency would not regard those estates as prosperous. There is a disparity in the county between the south, where the population is ageing rapidly, and the Aylesbury area, which is one of the fastest-growing parts of England and has a young population.

It is wrong to assume that old people are passive these days. When I speak to GPs in my constituency, they say that elderly patients come in, describe their symptoms and then explain that they have looked their condition up on the internet and discovered that some new treatment is available. They then tell their doctor, in forthright terms, that they want that treatment and are unwilling to take no for an answer. They have high and increasing expectations that a previous generation of retired people did not have.

Mrs. Gillan: I had a case exactly like that in my surgery as recently as yesterday. A constituent had been told by his GP to look up what could be done for his condition, and he went back with what needed to be done. The GP would very much like to recommend the treatment but, of course, would be running against an ever-diminishing budget.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend is right, and all of us are finding such cases arising in our constituency work load. I do not know whether she recalls this, but I believe that it was the first of the strategic health authority's trinity of chief executives who questioned in a valedictory memorandum whether the current level of funding for Buckinghamshire was sufficient to maintain a core service at the level which local people are entitled to expect.

My hon. Friend put it well: there is little argument today about how health services are evolving and ought to evolve in this country. I am certainly not going to stand here and say that there cannot ever be change, and I believe that most of my constituents want health services to be delivered to them at home or as close as possible to their home. Trends in medical science and the trend toward concentrating specialisms—the treatment of particular cancers or particular types of heart attack—in a limited number of hospitals where all the experts and the best equipment can be brought together are certain to continue and will provide better patient outcomes.

The model for the future of a wide range of local, usually community-based services and in-patient stays in hospital reserved for serious conditions, for as short a time as possible, is one that I would endorse. However, my real fear about what is happening in Buckinghamshire is that although we are seeing that reconfiguration happen, it is driven not by clinical developments and priorities but by the urgency of making the books balance in a short period of time.

The Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust and the Buckinghamshire primary care trust have agreed a financial plan that involves cutting the number of hospital admissions by 100 a week, and securing a 30 per cent. reduction in admissions to A and E. That all has to be achieved by the end of the current financial year, and we are already seeing the results. I had a letter from a constituent the other day in which she complained that she had received a letter offering her an appointment at Stoke Mandeville hospital for treatment for which she had been referred by her GP, but then she had a telephone call to say that the offer was being withdrawn because her case no longer fitted the new criteria that the PCT had imposed for financial reasons.

I fear that community services, primary care and preventive services not only will not be developed in time to meet the demands of the new model of health care but are actually under acute strain at the moment. Let us look at what is happening with the PCT. I have been told by local GPs that the health visitor service has been cut, and moved from GP surgeries into a central office location. When I visited a GP surgery on one of my most deprived estates the other week, I was told by the nurses and other staff that it is sometimes difficult to get hold of a health visitor because health visitors often do not know from one day to the next where they will be based or which people they will be able to see. Comprehensive coverage by health visitors of the poorest areas of Aylesbury may still be an aspiration, but it is not happening in practice.

The same is true for district nurses and the school nurse service, which is desperately stretched. The truth about primary care in our county is that anything that is not the subject of a specific Government target is liable to be squeezed and cut.

There is little scope for GP innovation that would push up the standard of service. GPs tell me that they feel frustrated when they come up with a new idea but are then told by the PCT that unless it can afford to fund the innovation throughout the county, no practice is allowed to provide it. That undermines professional responsibility and stifles the possibility of some real improvement in the quality of health care locally.

I have already referred to the pressure on Wycombe and Stoke Mandeville hospitals to cut admissions and attendances at A and E, but we have learned recently that there is to be a further regional review of hospital capacity, which will involve Berkshire and Buckinghamshire and possibly Oxfordshire as well—my understanding is

[Mr. Lidington]

that the John Radcliffe hospital is also under acute financial pressure. Local people will greet the prospect of a further hospital review with horror, and there will be fear that another round of hospital cuts is on its way.

If we are to move to the new model of health care, it is clear that an effective ambulance service will be important. Paramedics need to be able to reach patients quickly and to stabilise their condition, and we need an effective ambulance service if more patients are to be transported significant distances to the specialist hospitals and units of the future. However, the South Central Ambulance Service NHS Trust is already struggling to meet its targets. Yesterday, I had a letter from the chairman of the trust, who said that services in rural areas of the south-central region in particular were under huge strain.

The other element that is missing from the discussion about the new model of NHS care is the place of county council social services. As the Minister will know, Buckinghamshire county council is already a floor authority, and news has just come through that it will again receive the smallest grant increase of any shire county in England for the next financial year. The eligibility criteria for access to social care are being tightened year on year. My fear is that, inevitably, that will mean that more elderly and disabled people, and more people with a chronic illness who are unable to qualify for care that they might previously have received, will fall over or have accidents. They will be admitted to A and E, and possibly for an in-patient stay in hospital. Paradoxically, that would increase rather than reduce the financial pressures that some of the reductions and reconfigurations in service have been designed to achieve.

In conclusion, I want to leave the Minister in no doubt that those are not just my views as a politician. The view of nearly every doctor and nurse in my constituency to whom I have spoken is that the local health service in our county is struggling, and that, yes, there needs to be a coherent look at the configuration and pattern of health care in Buckinghamshire, but that that needs to be linked to an examination of the funding system to ensure that people get the quality of service they are entitled to through payment of their taxes.

9.58 am

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on securing this debate. Despite her heavy commitments elsewhere, she has proved again this morning that she is a relentless and doughty champion of the health care and other interests of her constituents, as all of us in Buckinghamshire try to be. It is worth putting on the record once again that our colleague the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) cannot be with us, but my hon. Friend spoke for him.

I cannot rival my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) in my use of the local NHS, although I have been through Wycombe hospital accident and emergency and in a ward there for a brief period, so I have had some personal experience of the NHS in Bucks, as well as the constituency experience that my hon. Friends have had as Members of Parliament. However, I do not want to start a Monty Python-type competition, where colleagues and others compare their experiences of woe, especially—on a more serious note—given the experiences of some of my constituents, which I have heard about in my surgery and outside it over the past eight years. Given that I am leaving the House at the election, I shall speak at least partly in a valedictory spirit.

In my eight years as a Member of Parliament, undoubtedly the most important constituency issue has been health care: no other single issue compares to it in terms of the interest, concern and anxiety it arouses. In those eight years, the cuts and closures at Wycombe hospital—the loss of our children's ward, maternity ward and full A and E service—have created a huge ruction in Buckinghamshire. I want to make three simple points about that whole experience.

First, when I arrived as a new candidate in 2000, I visited Wycombe hospital and spoke to a gentleman called Roy Darby, who had been the chief executive there—Wycombe and Stoke Mandeville had recently been merged into a trust—for at least 10 years and, I think, longer. The NHS has always been primarily a nationally orientated and directed service, but the structures were reasonably stable and people such as Roy Darby knew their way round the local NHS backwards and exhibited a particular sense of responsibility, ownership and knowledge of it.

Since my being elected our regional health authority has been merged, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham said. The three primary care groups that existed at the time of my election became three primary care trusts, some of which had deficits—as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury is fond of saying, no one has ever found the balancing surpluses—and then became a single Bucks-wide primary care trust. The mental health trust has been merged with Oxfordshire and the ambulance trust has been merged. Wycombe hospital had just gone in with Stoke. We have experienced a kind of permanent revolution, as in Mao's China. Local people undoubtedly feel that their ownership of the service, which was never particularly strong, has been compromised in the past eight years, and that when cuts and closures have been put on the table, besides some of the improvements that have taken place, they have not had any say in what has happened.

Secondly, on the cuts and closures, as I have said, good things have happened and are happening at Wycombe hospital. I have good relations with the management team there and with the PCT, as my colleagues do: we try to work together. However, in 2004, when this wave of cuts and closures was announced and rippled through large parts of the country—including in substantial areas of the south of England, where Government Members of Parliament appeared to be less well represented than Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs—there was a feeling that managers had been sent in from outside to ram these changes through.

Thirdly, the main substance of my hon. Friends' speeches is the problem with the funding formula. In a rational dispensation, spending would be related to need, meaning that spending would largely be related to age. As my hon. Friends have said, we have an ageing population in Buckinghamshire, particularly in south Buckinghamshire. In a rational dispensation, deprivation funding would be allocated from a separate budget. Under such a system it is unlikely that Buckinghamshire

would receive 17 per cent. less per head than the national average, which is the case. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) will say more about this later.

Essentially, given the pace and scale of change that my hon. Friends are describing, in Buckinghamshire we are like the Red Queen in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", who had to run to stand still. Given the funding disadvantage, our NHS staff and managers have to climb a steep incline to get on top of their deficits and manage the restructuring at a time of great change, because there is an enormous knock-on effect from our having 17 per cent. less funding per head. For example, there is a clear effect on my poorer constituents in areas such as Castlefield and Micklefield. My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury mentioned the poorer areas in his constituency, such as Quarrendon. In effect, our poorer constituents, because they are not surrounded by others who are as poor as they are, are disadvantaged compared with poorer constituents elsewhere living alongside those who are as poor as they are. That has had a substantial effect on communities in my constituency containing people who may not speak English as a first language, some of whom have recently arrived and many of whom may not always have grasped how rapid the pace of change has been and what effect these changes were having on their local services.

Mrs. Gillan: May I say how much my hon. Friend will be missed as his constituents' representative when he leaves the House? He has taken the headlines on many occasions, particularly in respect of health and health services, defending his constituents' rights to a decent service. Does he agree that this double hit on these people in our constituencies who are less wealthy and have less disposable income is exacerbated by poor public transport systems? Therefore, the changes that accompany this downturn in financial circumstances often mean moving out-patient clinics, even though people have established a pattern of travel and find it almost impossible to reorganise their travel arrangements to get to farther-flung clinics. They are disproportionately affected at a time when they are trying to be treated by the health service, and their poverty means that, in many instances, they are unable to travel to some of the changed services.

Mr. Goodman: I agree. I will return to that point in a moment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury rightly said, one effect of change being implemented is that transport has to take the strain, and that applies whether the ambulance service is involved, or whether poorer people are travelling who may not have access to their own private transport.

I have touched on the implications of the change for my poorer constituents. Obviously, in respect of the better-off ones, if they are elderly they are still entitled to such care. That group of people is more likely to need the NHS than others, as my hon. Friends have said.

The funding shortage is having a paralysing effect on change in the local NHS. Wycombe hospital and Stoke, in the trust, want to achieve foundation status. We support foundation status, as the Government do, but the deficit, and the shuffling of deficits back and forth between the hospital trusts and the PCT, is a millstone round the neck of the foundation status application. Our health service is prevented from moving forward by the deficit. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury said, not only can it not move forward; we are now faced with the hospital review to which he referred. I am sure that my constituents and our local paper, the *Bucks Free Press*, will look on that with a searching light.

I will not labour the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham made about transport, but if, at the same time as going through the changes, doctors are being told to look for ways of not referring patients, the stress on patients who are referred will fall on the transport system. The Chamber will have noted what my hon. Friend said about the ambulance trust.

All together, some good things have happened in the Buckinghamshire NHS Hospitals Trust, but the system is under great strain. With the approach of an election, in which I shall not be participating, many of my constituents will cast their minds back to 1997 and the claim of the then Leader of the Opposition, Tony Blair, that voters had 24 hours to save the NHS. They will look at their local NHS and acknowledge the many good things that have happened, but they will remember that in 1997 Wycombe had full A and E, a maternity unit and a children's unit. Although they will understand that change must happen, it cannot be forced through against a background of having, unfairly, 17 per cent. less funding than the national average.

10.11 am

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to participate in this debate. I hope to do so briefly, because much of what I want to say has been said by my hon. Friends. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) for securing this debate and opening it.

It might be helpful for the Minister if I try to step back a little from the immediacy of the funding issues that we have described, and go back to some basic principles. It will be widely acknowledged on both sides of the Chamber that NHS resources are not infinite. If my party has the opportunity of forming a Government, we will face exactly the same funding constraints, particularly in the current financial climate, that the Government must face. However, those constraints should not allow us to engage in propaganda exercises to pretend that something is when it is not. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) rightly highlighted the extent to which the Government have met the promises that they made pre-1997, but it is impossible to reach that conclusion for Buckinghamshire as a whole and south Buckinghamshire in particular because of the extent to which services have been curbed or cut.

A live issue is the extent to which an area should receive funding in relation to its need or indices of deprivation. The county, including my constituency, is prosperous by national standards, so one can understand that the Government might argue that the population's health care needs are likely to be proportionately less. That may be correct, and the indices of overall health in Buckinghamshire do not seem to be very bad, but the difficulty that arises with that approach is that as services are progressively phased out, those who may need them will be unable to access any service at all. That is the

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

hallmark of the problem that I face in my constituency. It consists of some people who are very rich, and some who are on middling incomes and who can manage, but it also has pockets of extreme poverty which is every bit as bad in one or two places as in inner-city areas in London.

One of my wards was, and still may be, ranked 13th in the indices of deprivation in the south-east, although that is not as bad as some of the wards in the constituencies of some of my hon. Friends here today. People there find that the services that they need and cannot access through the private sector are simply not available in the health service.

This is an old theme, and the second or third time that we have had a similar debate about the problem of funding of health services in Buckinghamshire. Returning to that theme, I well remember that as one of the Government's first actions when they came to office in 1997—I give this to the Minister by way of illustration of the problem—they removed the tax breaks for people of pensionable age taking out private health insurance. I remember that vividly, because the consequence was to create the first winter crisis after I was elected to Parliament. Those people could no longer access private health care, particularly in my constituency, or beds in private hospitals when they had pneumonia in winter, so they started to fill the hospital at Wycombe. I remember the administrators saying that they believed that that was the cause of that sudden surge, thereby making it even harder for those who were more deprived to obtain access.

How does the problem of chronic underfunding manifest itself? My hon. Friends have made some important points, and I do not want to repeat them, but I endorse what they said. I shall give the Minister some examples that may interest him in understanding what is going on. The first has been alluded to, but I am returning to it. It is the problem of the reverse turf war between social services and the health service. Generally in a turf war, people are told to get off someone else's patch, but throughout my time as a Member of Parliament since 1997 I have witnessed the struggle between social services and the health service in asking the other to come on to their patch and take over responsibility for the services that they should provide.

We have discussed acute services, and I want to move away from that a little. A matter that fills my surgeries weekly is arguments about elderly people with modest circumstances in hospitals—where they will go next to be cared for, what the element of nursing care should be and who should take responsibility for it. Leaving aside the fact that I am perfectly aware that individuals may have a financial interest because of the extent to which they must pay from their pockets, that happens even when people will never be in a position to make a contribution to their care if they move into a care home. It is a source of endless correspondence, and all because the PCT and social services want to pass responsibility round and round because neither has the resources to meet the need.

That is one example. The second is the PCT's approach to those who are, perhaps fortunately, a small minority but who, for one reason or another, need specialist provision that falls outside the competence of the Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust and Thames valley hospitals. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that what should be a reasonably rapid bureaucratic process, by which referral to a specialist London hospital that will provide what is sometimes life-saving care takes weeks, almost inevitably requires my involvement in writing letters to him, or to the head of the PCT or the regional trust trying to kick someone into acknowledging that specialist provision that can be accessed only at, for example, St. Thomas's hospital, should be provided.

There is a constant, underlying theme of difficulty in moving the bureaucratic logjam. Although 99 times out of 100 we will probably end up getting what we asked for because it is the right thing to have—I say that to reassure the Minister—in the meantime, the patient and their family can legitimately claim that the wait and delay have had a significant impact on the health of the individual. I do not regard that as acceptable.

Given the human condition, I know that we will never have a perfect service, and I do not expect one. However, the amount of time, effort and energy that is devoted to bureaucracy is worrying and must also cost money. In my role as an MP, I keep thinking about the amount of money that could be used in front-line services that is being squandered in shoring up the bureaucratic paper round. That process dilutes the amount of money that I and wealthy members of my constituency pay in tax, before the money can be translated into the service and used to the advantage of the person who needs it. Such bureaucracy adds to that process.

Mental health provision has been mentioned. It is a subject of interest to me, and in the past I have been involved with Mind, when I was vice-chairman of a group in London. Mental health provision in the county is, frankly, poor. That is not the fault of the professionals who provide it, and if I were to be optimistic I would say that it is perhaps on a mildly improving graph. There was a period about two years ago when mental health provision had become so bad that I thought it had reached the abyss.

My hon. Friends have highlighted the issue of counselling services, and I would like to pick up that subject to illustrate my point. Counselling services are accessed directly on referral by a GP. One of the features of the briefing that was helpfully provided by Buckinghamshire primary care trust, is that it wants to cut costs by lowering the number of admissions to accident and emergency and referrals to hospitals. We all know that mental health problems exist, and with the economic downturn and the various other financial pressures on families, I get the distinct impression that that trend will be rising.

Counselling and referral systems operated in the county very cheaply. Buckinghamshire PCT gave a £300,000 funding subsidy, which it is now withdrawing. Of that, £90,000 is being withdrawn from Bucks Mind which, as the Minister will know, provides a largely voluntary service. On the face of it, that is not a large sum of money, although I accept that in the context of the PCT this is probably an essential cut to try to meet budgetary constraints and to save money. However, if that service cannot be provided because the money has been withdrawn, what will the consequences be on the need to access more specialist services through accident and emergency or elsewhere?

This is a classic illustration of where by trying to make savings and cuts of this kind—particularly the virtual closure of a voluntary service that simply needs help with its overheads—we are likely to put greater pressure on the health service elsewhere. When the cut was proposed, it was suggested that the referral service for counselling to Buckinghamshire Mind was not a good system. However, Buckinghamshire PCT was clearly aware of Mind's effectiveness, as it had been happy to fund it without any difficulty for years in the past, arguing that it was extraordinarily good value for money. The fact that the PCT now believes that such funding will no longer be possible, illustrates that a series of warped priorities have been imposed on it due to the current problems that it faces.

I will not go on at great length, but I will conclude with another illustration of my point. The ambulance service has been mentioned, and we learn that although the apparent needs of the area are not as great as elsewhere, the service has seen an inexorable rise in volume demand by more than 6 per cent. per annum in recent years. It is currently running at 8 per cent. up on last year, and has pointed out that that is not sustainable given that only 60 per cent. of patients go to hospital when an ambulance is called out, and only 10 per cent. need extended hospital treatment on admission. That strongly suggests that the ambulance service is being used as a bottom-line safety net for the provision of primary care services to the local community—indeed, I know that to be the case.

All of us on this side of the Chamber are supportive of the Thames Valley air ambulance service, which is entirely voluntarily funded. One of its complaints is that it is being used for routine hospital transfers to save the ambulance trust cash. It resents that because it is a specialist emergency service that intervenes when somebody has to be transported rapidly from one place—often removed from a road—to a hospital. I hope that the Minister will forgive me this digressory tour to illustrate what is happening on the ground in our area.

I do not expect the Minister to be a miracle worker. I know that his Government have wrecked the public finances and now have to pick up the pieces, and I fully appreciate that the area I represent will never receive the same amount of funding per head of population as a place such as Liverpool or another great city that has higher levels of deprivation. However, we cannot go on in this way. At some point, this will all go badly wrong for the Government. Illustrations of serious failures will be visited on the Minister, which will be entirely due to a failure to do any creative, sensible, medium-term planning for how to secure effective services in health care for our constituents locally. It requires doing something more than submitting the poor old primary care trust—which in my view does its best—to an endless cycle of crisis management.

10.27 am

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on securing this debate, and on getting a good turnout from her colleagues, who have all spoken passionately about the health needs of their county.

The hon. Lady spoke about the impact of 12 years of Labour rule in Buckinghamshire. However, to introduce a note of discord, we must remember that when the Conservatives left office in 1997, we were spending a third less than the European average on health, and the consequences were there for all to see. The problems about access to health care continued for some time, and when I arrived in Parliament four years later, my first debate in this Chamber was on orthopaedic waiting times in Norfolk. At that time—I am sure that it was similar in Buckinghamshire—people sometimes waited for three years to get to hospital for a hip or knee joint operation. The situation was not good in those days, and there was a strong case for increasing investment in the health service. If that investment had not happened, I have no doubt that the position in Buckinghamshire would be even worse than it is today. None the less, the hon. Lady pointed to some important issues about how funding is allocated around the country.

What the hon. Lady said about her experience and what her hon. Friends described reminded me of the situation in Norfolk—a rural county with quite an elderly population. The pressures and strains on the health service in such an environment are very real. The ambulance service not meeting its target for getting to emergency calls on time was one issue that the hon. Lady raised. Poor access to dental care was another example that she gave. The ever increasing number of emergency admissions to acute hospitals is causing enormous strain. Her hon. Friends also made the point that there was the sense of the whole system under intense strain, and that is a picture that I see in my county of Norfolk.

Mrs. Gillan: I could have added that we also have problems with low rates of Chlamydia screening. We have problems supporting people quitting smoking. We have problems with proactive management of long-term conditions. I did not give the whole list, because I wanted to set the scene for the debate, but I do not want the hon. Gentleman to diminish the problems by trying to draw an arcane parallel with what happened 12 years ago. I am talking about today. The Government who came in 12 years ago also removed the tax breaks for private health care from my constituents, many of whom then felt that they could not afford it and fell back on the NHS.

Norman Lamb: I do not in any way wish to diminish the problems. I am simply saying that I see many of the same problems in my county of Norfolk. I intended to go on to discuss mental health, which the hon. Lady and some of her hon. Friends also discussed. Mental health is at a particular disadvantage in the health service because it does not benefit from any centrally imposed target. Such targets have driven improved access in other areas of health care, but one consequence of targets is that areas that are not targeted lose out. In many cases, people in Buckinghamshire and elsewhere wait for months on end for access to cognitive behaviour therapy and other objectively approved therapies that can help people to recover, get them back to work and so on. Access is appalling.

The hon. Lady, in her intervention, and the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) lamented the loss of subsidy for private health care, which is something that causes me real concern. Do the Conservatives propose a reintroduction of that subsidy?

[Norman Lamb]

If the hon. Lady and the hon. and learned Gentleman lamented its loss, the clear implication is that they want it back.

Mr. Grieve: What the hon. Gentleman has just said is a complete load of nonsense. I made the position clear. The reality in the area that I represent is that if everyone in the area solely made use of the national health service, the system would collapse. Because there are wealthy people, many of them do not do that. After 1997, when certain tax breaks for the elderly to get private health care were removed, more of them became dependent on the NHS. I used that example to illustrate how a bed use crisis developed over a winter in one of my local hospitals; on the evidence of the administrators and doctors, the crisis was entirely the result of that change. I simply used it to illustrate the consequences, in an area where services are already stretched, of introducing another element into the equation.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful for that clarification. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham said that the funding formula delivers 17 per cent. less for her area than the national average. There is concern in many parts of the country that the funding formula does not sufficiently recognise the cost of delivering health care in rural areas, particularly in areas with an elderly population. Even if an elderly population happens to be relatively well off, they still have health needs. It still costs money to provide for operations in acute hospitals and so on. However, the funding formula does not appear to recognise that sufficiently.

All the problems that the hon. Lady described, fairly and accurately so far as health services in Buckinghamshire are concerned, are likely to become significantly worse unless we are smart about how we use the available resources in the health service. Whichever party wins the general election next year, the prospects for the health service look bleak, because even if we ring-fence, protect, or safeguard funding for the NHS, the reality is that throughout the developed world, we are seeing rises in health costs. That has happened over many decades, and that trend is likely to continue with an ageing population and with lifestyle conditions such as obesity, and others caused by alcohol abuse and so on.

Another factor is the cost of new drugs coming on stream. A fortnight ago, I talked to a group of consultants in Norfolk who told me that two new drugs approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence had a cost impact on Norfolk PCT of about £2.5 million. That is from a fixed budget, not a budget that is increased by that amount to fund it, so something else has to give. The impact of an ageing population, new drugs coming on stream and lifestyle conditions means that we have rising health costs at a time when health budgets are likely to be fixed or rising very slowly. That creates the potential for a perfect storm, and the risk is that the most vulnerable lose out in those circumstances. Some of the public health services to which the hon. Lady referred are often most at risk.

When the health service was last under financial pressure, in 2005-06, the Select Committee on Health concluded that services such as mental health and public health programmes were cut, rather than services that might be able to take the strain a little better. There was no attempt to improve productivity at that time, or no success at improving productivity. Services such as mental health took the hit.

There is a risk that when the financial pressure increases, crisis management takes over and there is a process of slash and burn. Instead of doing that, we must consider how we can redesign services to improve the efficient use of resources in the health service. One problem is that financial levers in the health service incentivise activity. We pay acute hospitals more and more for doing more activity. We do not pay to optimise health care and quality. We do not pay to incentivise primary care to keep people out of hospitals. The system of payment by results was criticised by Mark Britnell, the former director of commissioning in the Department of Health. Just before he left in the summer, he said at a conference in London that there was an urgent need to abolish or radically reform payment by results. That is the Government's own system, and it was the director of commissioning who made that case.

The Government have introduced a concept called practice-based commissioning, which is designed to encourage primary care to do more and to take work that is currently undertaken in acute hospitals and do it closer to home, in the community. The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) made a very good point. When GPs go to the PCT with proposals for services that they could provide under practice-based commissioning, all too often they are turned down. I understand the concern expressed by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that sometimes we try to redesign services too fast, but when there are opportunities to develop community-based services around GP practices, those proposals are rejected by PCTs, which simply refuse to engage in the whole concept of practice-based commissioning. The person responsible for practice-based commissioning for the Department of Health has himself said that the concept appears to be failing and is almost dead in the water. That system to encourage GPs to do more, closer to home, appears to be failing. What should the way forward be, given the acute financial squeeze on public services such as health, which means that little new money is coming in and that costs are rising? There are a number of elements—

Mr. Peter Atkinson (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I would be grateful if he would keep an eye on the clock. He has been speaking for more than 10 minutes, and we need to hear the Minister.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful for that reminder, Mr. Atkinson.

Let me summarise. We need to decentralise power and accountability so that Buckinghamshire PCT is accountable to its local community. We need to integrate health and social care, focusing particularly on those with chronic conditions so that we keep them out of hospital and prevent crises from occurring. We need to break down the divide between primary and secondary care. Finally, we need to get NHS financial incentives working so that we can focus on the prevention of ill health and on health and well-being. We can then end the crazy process of simply incentivising more and more activity that does not optimise health in the community in Buckinghamshire or anywhere else.

10.40 am

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on securing the debate. I welcome the fact that she also spoke on behalf of the constituents of the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), who presides over this place.

My hon. Friend described PCT and local health care services that are in absolute crisis. She rightly highlighted the fact that the current reconfigurations are taking place much too quickly to enable standards of care and quality to be maintained. She highlighted the 40 per cent. cut at clinics in Amersham and the complete cut in counselling services.

As my hon. Friend said, the right hon. Member for Buckingham is concerned about mental health services—£35 million has been stripped out just so that they can break even. Our greatest concern is that it is precisely mental health services that are being cut back to deal with our financial deficit. As the Minister is well aware, mental illness costs this country £77 billion. Sadly, after 12 years of this Government, they remain a Cinderella service and they are very vulnerable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) spoke of the reduction in health visitors, school nurses and district nurses and of particular concern at the Wycombe and Stoke Mandeville hospitals. He also spoke of his extensive use of NHS care, which is perhaps why he looks so well this morning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) talked of his constituents' massive concerns about the significant changes at Wycombe hospital. He spoke at length about reconfigurations and the fact that the Government have continued the ghastly cycle of constant change.

I sat on the Health Committee when it undertook an inquiry into reconfigurations, and there has been one reconfiguration every 18 months since the NHS started. At the time, the Committee highlighted the significant loss of focus that occurs following reconfigurations, as well as their absolutely paralysing effect, and that has never been truer than it is today. At the end of the day, reconfigurations deliver few cost savings; in fact, they are a cost in themselves.

The funding formula is the crux of the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury rightly pointed out that the supply of money is not infinite. However, demand probably is. When I first trained as a nurse, people would come into A and E wheeling their hernia in a wheelbarrow in front of them, but expectations today are such that they probably would not accept a 1-inch hernia. Expectations have rightly gone up, but the demand is a constant pressure on the NHS, which does not have an infinite supply of money.

There is rightly concern about the dance that takes place between the NHS and social services, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury pointed out. At times such as this, everybody scurries around trying to dump the costs of care on somebody else. In my constituency, there is concern that the move to reconfigure services and look after people in their own homes will see the NHS dump costs on social services, which face similar budgetary constraints. The patient ends up being looked after in their own home and receiving worse care and services—less physiotherapy and less occupational therapy. Indeed, they are often unnoticed by services.

On the funding formula, I must tell the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) that the issue is not just what we spend, but how we spend it. Buckinghamshire receives 17 per cent. less funding than the average, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham rightly said, her constituents' needs are not 17 per cent. lower than the average. The cost of providing ambulance services and many other services in areas such as Buckinghamshire is also greater than the average. The Government White Paper "Our health, our care, our say" was quite explicit about the fact that changes in services should not be made in response to short-term budgetary constraints, but that is exactly what we are seeing.

Healthy and wealthy areas often have older populations with a much greater need for health care services. As has rightly been said, it is simply not the case that wealthy areas have less need. Although such areas are relatively affluent, they are the big users of health care services. Wealthy areas also have significant, albeit small, areas of deprivation, and people should not live in such areas, which do not attract the significant funding that other areas do.

When I sat on the Health Committee, we also did a report on budgetary deficits, and I point the Minister to the work of Professor Sheila Asantha, who looked at the impact of the Government's funding formula on wealthy areas. She pointed out that those living in wealthy areas get the worst health care services, because the funding formula is skewed towards areas of deprivation, which need money for public health improvement but do not necessarily have demand for health care services.

The Government have never fully understood that issue. In this season of good will, I do not want to make too many party political points, but I hope that the Minister can respond and demonstrate that he has some understanding of the difference between money for public health improvements, which needs to go to deprived areas, and money for health care services.

We need to separate the money for health care service delivery from the money for public health improvements, and that is the Conservative party's policy. As I am sure the Minister is aware, improving public health takes more than money in the health service. In many ways, it is not appropriate to deliver such measures via the health service—we also need social and economic change if we are to make a difference. That is exactly why we have seen health care inequalities rise despite the Government's best efforts. The Government have been ill informed.

Targets have been mentioned, but not as much as they should have been. Again, as I said, the issue is not just the money we spend but how we spend it. I recently went to a conference attended by a lot of senior doctors and surgeons, although I will not identify it because of the comments that were made. However, there was quite a lot of talk about targets, and that is the same wherever I go. Those at the conference went on and on about targets distorting clinical priorities. Indeed, people in the audience started talking about the fact that they now have training days to work out how to play the system—it is called gaming.

[Anne Milton]

The problem with process-driven targets is that care that does not have a target simply does not happen. The Government have never fully understood the difference between a process-driven target and an outcome. To take as an example follow-up for long-term conditions, many people with diabetes and conditions such as epilepsy need follow-up in secondary care; however, they currently do not get it because of Government targets relating to first appointments. The process is driven entirely by centrally-driven Government priorities, not clinical needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury mentioned paperwork, of which targets attract a huge amount. We have many people now employed in the health service solely to deal with that. There are outstanding questions, but I realise that time is short so I shall draw my comments to a close.

Perhaps the Minister can explain what is happening to the £30 million of reserves that the strategic health authority currently holds. What plans do the Government have to look again at the funding formula? Can the Minister state, hand on heart, that the reconfigurations in the past 12 years have produced better delivery of health care services? Does he understand how damaging that change has been, and how much it has cost?

10.51 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): In the nine minutes left for me to reply I want first to congratulate the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) on securing the debate. I also congratulate the hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) and the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who joined her in making a strong plea on behalf of their Buckinghamshire constituencies and that of Mr. Speaker. Their plea, essentially, when we get to the bones of it, is "More money for Buckinghamshire NHS, please." That may be a bit of a shorthand version, but I think that is essentially it. They raised some specific issues that time will not allow me to cover, and I am sure that the NHS organisations in Buckinghamshire that will be following the debate will take forward some of the detailed points.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister give way?

Phil Hope: I have only just begun.

Mrs. Gillan: I and my hon. Friends would all be delighted to receive a very detailed letter from the Minister about the issues that he has not the time to cover.

Phil Hope: The hon. Lady is of course in regular conversation with her NHS organisations and I am sure they would be delighted to write to her about the details that she and her hon. Friends have raised, which are of course a matter for local NHS organisations.

We have had a decade of expansion and of a massive catch-up in health funding, which has yielded big improvements throughout the country, Buckinghamshire included. Opposition Members will know that in Buckinghamshire 99 per cent. of patients attending accident and emergency are now seen within four hours; 91 per cent. of patients now receive treatment requiring hospital admission within 18 weeks, with that figure rising to 97 per cent. for day cases; and more than 93 per cent. of suspected cancer patients are seen by a specialist within a fortnight of referral. As far as delivering outcomes in the past decade, those figures are a testament not only to the additional funding from the Government, but to the hard work of local NHS staff, whom I thank for their efforts. We are determined to bank that progress and to continue to improve standards in a very different financial climate.

I think that every hon. Member who has spoken has raised the issue of the national funding formula and suggested that it penalises Buckinghamshire unfairly. The new funding formula that we are using was developed by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, an independent panel of experts. It has been designed to meet the twin objectives of equal access for equal need, and reducing health inequalities—themes that hon. Members repeated throughout the debate. The funding formula recognises that the principal cause of variation in health care needs is the age structure of the population, so it factors in the number of older people and the expected number of births.

It is widely acknowledged that poverty significantly increases people's chances of getting sick and needing health care, so the formula also increases funding if a primary care trust region has a high level of deprivation. In Buckinghamshire, the proportion of people over 60 is 22 per cent., the same as the England average. I agree that there are pockets of deprivation, which is something that local providers must take into account when providing services and allocating resources. Overall, however, although I would not describe Buckinghamshire as rich, as the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield did, it is, as other hon. Members said, one of the more affluent parts of the country. That means, according to the funding formula, that it receives a lower proportion of funding than somewhere with, say, 30 per cent. of its population aged over 60. The point is that it is the independent expert panel, the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, that believes that the formula is the best way of allocating funding. Whatever the arguments about the formula—and I believe I have made a powerful case for it—Buckinghamshire's funding will continue to grow. The NHS in Buckinghamshire will still get more than £652 million this financial year and £686 million in 2010-11—more than a 10.5 per cent. increase over the two years.

The route to financial health for Buckinghamshire, as for all parts of the NHS, lies not in questioning the funding formula, although I have heard the points made by the Opposition, but in radical action to improve the quality and effectiveness of local services. The NHS has faced long-standing financial pressures locally; that point has been made and I recognise it. However, it has told me that it is working to address those issues. Both the hospital trust and the PCT are working to break even for 2009-10. They believe that they are on the front foot in re-engineering health services; they have formed a Healthy Buckinghamshire leaders group—a joint plan of action to deal with current financial problems; and their summit plan is already making a difference. The new Buckinghamshire-wide out-of-hours service is already up and running, not least in the constituency of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, and there

are plans for a new GP-led centre based in Wycombe hospital. The hospital trust tells me it expects a 15 per cent. drop in demand for out-patient services in the next few years as care is increasingly—and rightly—delivered by GPs and other community services, as the hon. Member for Aylesbury remarked.

The way patients use NHS services means that demand drops for some out-patient services, and it is not a good idea to run half-empty clinics. That is why clinicians across the NHS in Buckinghamshire are exploring how to combine out-patient clinics to make the best use of available resources. A smarter NHS will mean more services coming out of hospitals and into the home or the community, although I recognise the points about concerns over rural ambulance services. I understand that the review is taking place in Buckinghamshire, and the final report will be presented to the South Central health overview and scrutiny committee in January 2010.

A point was also made about psychological therapies. The PCT's professional executive committee, led by clinicians, agreed the recommendation to refocus psychological therapy resources, totalling more than £4 million, on evidence-based therapies. As the Minister responsible for mental health I can tell the hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) that a 50 per cent. increase in funding for mental health services since 2001—a £2 billion increase—is remarkable and puts this country's mental health services at the forefront of those in Europe.

I have tried not to be too party political in this debate, but other hon. Members have made it so, and I therefore conclude by saying that when the Conservative party left office in 1997 the NHS was on its knees. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) was right. In the past 12 years the Conservative party voted against every Budget, with record increases in NHS spending that brought benefits not least to Buckinghamshire. Finally, the Conservatives are approaching the general election pledged to abandon key criteria for waiting times, and to create an austerity Britain, with smaller Government. From what we have heard today it appears they intend to reintroduce tax breaks for private insurance schemes and abandon deprivation formula in the funding allocations.

Mrs. Gillan: On a point of order, Mr. Atkinson. Is it in order that when the Minister himself thought there was little time for the debate he should reduce it to a political diatribe although he has not answered the question of what will happen to my constituents in the event of a flu epidemic, given their straitened circumstances?

Mr. Peter Atkinson (in the Chair): Order. That is a point of debate, not a question for the Chair.

Phil Hope: It was also a skilful attempt to use up time, as I describe the options at the next general election, which will be, for the people of Buckinghamshire, a fundamental choice between going back to the bad days when the Conservatives ran down the NHS, or looking forward to a period of further investment to support the health service in Buckinghamshire and across the country.

House of Commons Reform

11 am

Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central) (Lab): This debate will focus on the excellent report produced by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright). Sadly, he cannot be here today because he is chairing a meeting of the Public Administration Committee; we would have benefited from his contribution.

Credit for setting up the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons should go to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House, and particularly so for appointing exactly the right person to chair it. My hon. Friend does a superb job in chairing the PAC, and he did so yet again when chairing the Committee on Reform of the House of Commons and reporting in such short order. It demonstrates what a clever and shrewd man he is.

It is a measured report. It is well argued and well thought out. It is pragmatic. Without solving all the problems that confront us, it will undoubtedly take us firmly in the right direction. Reform of the House is badly needed.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): I was a member of the Committee, and I too pay tribute to the Chairman and the other members of the Committee here today. However, I would be a bit careful about complimenting the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House until they have implemented the report.

Mark Fisher: I shall come to that later, but of course the hon. Gentleman is right. Nevertheless, pending what happens to the report, the Government deserve some credit. We have been hoping for and arguing for such a report for the 26 years during which I have been a Member of the House. We have taken some steps forward, but as the hon. Gentleman said, now is the crucial moment. Will we see the report implemented—and will it implemented in the bold way that it should be?

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I accept all that the hon. Gentleman says. He brings an important matter before the House today. Does he not accept, however, that the report does not go far enough in that it does not tackle the abuse of MPs having second jobs? Being an MP in today's environment is a full-time job. One of the greatest abuses that has been perpetrated is MPs having two, three or four—some of them even nine or 10—remunerated additional employments. We cannot do the job, retaining public confidence in the House and its Members, if MPs are going to moonlight. It simply ain't on.

Mark Fisher: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, but the report correctly focuses on the political reforms necessary in the House. Plenty of behavioural reforms are necessary; and this year's events, with the concentration on allowances and expenses, shows that the public are impatient with Members. Much needs to be put right, and I hope that it will be put right. However, the report is about political reform and what we need to do to strengthen Parliament, so that it can fulfil its central responsibility of scrutinising legislation and holding the Government to account. That is the heart of the matter.

[Mark Fisher]

The hon. Gentleman is right about expenses and double jobs, but the debate is about our job here and how we do these things. What we are doing is a political matter. The report is excellent. It gives us a blueprint for a better and more effective Parliament.

Natascha Engel (North-East Derbyshire) (Lab): What does the hon. Gentleman mean by "political"? Does he mean party political, or does he mean something else?

Mark Fisher: Absolutely not party political. No, I mean the political work that we do here in holding the Government to account. That is what we are about. Party politics is a very different matter. I mean political with a small p.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I do not have another job, but it seems to be thought perfectly practical for someone on the Government Front Bench to fill two jobs—one in this House and one on the Front Bench.

Mark Fisher: I did not catch the end of the hon. Gentleman's question.

Mr. Turner: A Minister has a job in this House; he also has a job as Minister. That makes two jobs. Why can some of us not do that yet others can?

Mark Fisher: If the hon. Gentleman is making a case for the separation of powers between the Executive and the legislature, as happens under the American political system, he would find certain Members of the House—including some members of the Committee—most sympathetic. However, I believe that separating powers will bring more problems. We might achieve stronger scrutiny, but we would have less effective government because the Executive would not be rooted in the democratic process. Almost inevitably, they will be appointees. They might be clever, but they would not have roots in the public or in our democratic structures, which I believe has always been a strong characteristic of the House.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what is important is the quality of the work done by hon. Members? The report makes some useful comments along those lines, and on how quality might be improved. In the event of MPs' quality of work improving, especially in holding the Government to account, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we could seriously consider reducing the number of MPs, perhaps bringing us more in line with the American legislature that he cites?

Mark Fisher: I agree with all of that. I see no reason why the House needs more than 400 Members. We would probably do a better job at focusing our attention on our work if there were fewer of us. The report was about rebuilding the House, not about casting a new constitutional settlement, although we may well come to that in the fairly near future. I am sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says, but that is not what the Committee was about. We need to focus on how to improve and rebuild the House, which is badly in need of it.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Many newspapers, having seen the disillusion, distaste and disgust with MPs among the wider electorate, have suggested a substantial trimming in the number of Members. There may be something in that, but it can be done only in parallel with a substantial extension and improvement of services such as citizens advice and community law services, as they will be needed to pick up the casework. Four hundred Members simply could not handle the work load that we are experiencing now. We have to find some way to satisfactorily transfer that work.

Mark Fisher: We are probably going rather wide of the subject. However, I have great sympathy with my hon. Friend's view. Indeed, one necessary aspect of that would not be the strengthening of citizens advice, desirable though that would be, but a strengthening of local government, which has lost much of its autonomy and powers. It is now an agent for central Government rather than an entity in itself.

The report gives us a blueprint for a better, more effective Parliament. That would allow us to do what we are sent here to do. We are sent here to do two things. The first is to raise grievances in return for voting the Government Supply. The second is to hold the Government to account. Those have been the defining characteristics and responsibilities of the House for the past 800 years. They have not changed.

Natascha Engel: I am sorry to labour the point, but are we not here also to represent political parties? Apart from some hon. Members—they are the exception rather than the rule—we were all elected to represent those political parties. We would not be here unless we stood on the political party ticket.

Mark Fisher: That is self-evident. Those of us who think that we personally are being elected will find when we stand for re-election, in May or June or whenever it is, that it is our party that will be re-elected. Of course, the hon. Lady is absolutely right.

We are sent here to be a check and a balance on Government, which is in the interests of both the public and the Government. If we do our job properly and rigorously, it makes for better government. Sadly, however, we are failing in our duty. Over the past 100 years, Parliament has been getting steadily weaker and more enfeebled, and government has been getting stronger and more almighty, and that is not in the interests of Parliament, good government or the House.

Parliament, therefore, is not working. At the moment, the Government decide everything that happens in this place: when we come here, what we debate, what we can vote on and what substantive motions are put down on the Order Paper. We in this House are the creatures of Government. We come here when we are called, go away when we are told to, debate the subjects that the Government think are proper and vote when we are asked to do so. How we vote is a different matter. Parliament has lost the sense of its own identity. Its identity is distinct from that of Government; the Executive and the legislature have two totally different roles, and there is no longer a clear distinction between the two.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Although I recognise such symptoms and believe them to be undesirable, does not part of the problem stem from the fact that Members of Parliament view their role fundamentally differently from the one of 20 or 30 years ago? Too many Members of Parliament see themselves as super-councillors, who take up issues that should be handled by citizens advice bureaux and local law centres, rather than as representatives who hold the Government to account, which is a particularly important role for Back Benchers in Government.

Mark Fisher: Yes, but those roles are not alternatives. It is the fascination, complexity and difficulty of our job that we are, quite rightly, expected to do both. We have to be very involved with our communities, respond to them and learn from them. All of our e-mails and mail bags are a political education on a daily basis; we understand and learn what is happening in our country and what the effect is of Government legislation on our constituents. We have a very strong local root, and if we fail in that role, then holding the Government to account in some lofty way on a national forum will be ill-informed.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) raised an interesting point about party politics. It is a paradox and contradiction that as Back Bench Government MPs, we are here not only to be loyal to our party—we love our party and want it to do well—but to hold the Government to account. At times, that causes tension, which was seen most acutely during the vote on the Iraq war. Tension crops up almost every week in some form, and that makes this job demanding, interesting and very difficult to reform.

I do not disregard or belittle the party political element; it is very important and it is why we are all here. However, we must step aside from that and hold the Government to account regardless of our party affiliations. If we allow our party affiliations to dominate how we scrutinise and hold the Government to account, we become the rubber stamps of Government, which is poor value for the electorate and bad for this House. Such matters are not easy; if they were we would not have the difficulty of this report. They are both important and paradoxical.

The report is based on three good foundation stones. It states that the

"Government should get its business, the House should get its scrutiny and the public should get listened to".

I would amend that slightly. The Government should have the time to get their business through the House. Government have no God-given right to get any business they choose, but having had a mandate from the public, they must have sufficient time to put their business in front of the House, argue for it, and hope to convince the House that their business is good. So, the Government must have time; that is essential to efficient and practical government. The House should have the time and the facilities rigorously to scrutinise the programme, and the public must get the feeling that they are listened to and that their concerns are being reflected on the Floor of the House.

Dr. Murrison: Time is very precious, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Government must be given time to get their programme through so that they can fulfil the manifesto on which they have been elected. None the less, does he not agree that there has been a huge waste of time at the behest of this Government, particularly in relation to so-called topical debates, which have simply become a vehicle for the Government to bring forward matters that are obliging to them on a political level, rather than to deliver things of real topicality? Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that that is a matter for the House rather than the Government if we are to continue with topical debates?

Mark Fisher: One of the really impressive things about this report, which reflects well on the Chairman and the all-party members of the Committee, is that the Committee did not allow itself to get diverted by micro-matters such as that—important though they are. It kept to the high ground of what the principles were and the foundation stones that we need to put in place if we are to rebuild the House.

The first such foundation stone is the control of business. As the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said, if we are to implement this report, we must give the Government confidence that this is not some way of subverting them. They have a mandate; they have been elected and must have the time to put their programme through. By reassuring the Government that that is the case, the Committee is completely right, and that is essential if we are effectively to rebuild the House. I am talking here about the Government's control over their programme for which they have a mandate. I am not saying that the Government have the right to control the whole business of this House. When we look at what happens on the Floor of the House, we find that only half of the time is devoted to Government business. The rest of it is devoted to scrutiny, questions, and private Members', Back-Bench and Opposition business. It is about a 50:50 split between Government time—the time that they need to get their programme introduced and scrutinised—and our time. This is our House and it is absurd that we should be dependent on the Government for how we use that time. We are elected to this House; it is our House of Parliament. They are the Government and have a totally different responsibility. They have the responsibility to take executive action on behalf of this country and to introduce legislation and taxation. They need to get such things through, but they do not need to dominate and run the detailed day-to-day business of this House.

Natascha Engel: Will my hon. Friend explain to me what he thinks the difference is between a proposal for a Back-Bench business committee and a proposal for a House business committee? When we talk about who controls time, it is important to distinguish between Government and Back-Bench time. Will he make that distinction a bit clearer for me?

Mark Fisher: I hope that I have made it clear. The time that is properly the Government's is the time that they need to get through the programme on which they were elected and have a mandate for from the public. They have to introduce legislation and have it scrutinised and enacted. All other time is the House's business. If I have a criticism of this report it is that the distinction to which my hon. Friend refers is not made clear.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that sometimes these things are complex? I say that because Government-sponsored legislation is clearly the Government's business

[Dr. Evan Harris]

to get through and the report is very clear that the Government will be guaranteed the time to get that legislation through, but how that legislation is scrutinised by the House must be a matter for the House and it cannot be right for the Government to decide how much or how little time is available to the House to do that, within reason, what order it does it in and which parts of Bills are scrutinised. The Government should have their way; they can whip and people should vote on party lines. But the House should decide how it scrutinises Government legislation, otherwise it is not doing House business.

Mark Fisher: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman; that point goes to the heart of this report. However, I do not think that these things are necessarily great sticking points. One can look at other countries and other legislatures and see that they find a way of negotiating between all parts of their Parliaments and their Governments.

Natascha Engel: This point is not just a small sticking-point for me; it is a really big point for me. Who controls the time is a really big and important issue. I am a massive supporter of having a Back-Bench business committee that would look at how we can organise our House time better and how we can make better use of things such as topical debates and general debates; I have absolutely no problem with that idea. Where I have a problem and where I think that the report is quite dishonest is the idea that how much time we spend on different parts of Government legislation should be a decision that is made by Back Benchers and not the Executive. That is something that I have an issue with, because it is down to the Executive of the day to decide how much time we spend on different parts of Government legislation.

Mark Fisher: I must say that I do not entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is our job to scrutinise Government and therefore the time and the manner in which we scrutinise Government—either the scrutiny of Government Departments by Select Committees, or the scrutiny of Government legislation by Public Bill Committees—is our responsibility. It is not for the Government to tell us, "You may only scrutinise our legislation in such and such a way". It is for the Government to have all the time they need to present that legislation, to defend it and to persuade us that it is admirable legislation that we need to enact, but it is not for the Government to say, "You may not scrutinise us in such a way". I think that my hon. Friend and I will have to disagree on this point, much as I admire her.

It is because scrutiny goes to the heart of our role as parliamentarians that control of scrutiny is absolutely essential, which brings me to the issue of the control of the Select Committees. It is absolute nonsense that the Select Committees of this House, which have been a brilliant invention over the last 35 years, should effectively be determined, either directly or indirectly, by the Government. It is like the Government choosing their own invigilators and scrutineers, and saying, "We will be looked at very closely, but only on the terms and by the people who we approve".

Select Committees are a matter for this House to determine; they are nothing to do with the Government at all. The Government have their own job to get on with legislation; the Government do not have the job of scrutinising themselves, which is effectively what Select Committees do. To my mind, it is amazing that the Select Committees function as well as they do and that is thanks to some very brave and very independent-minded Chairpeople, such as Gwyneth Dunwoody, the former Member of Parliament for Crewe and Nantwich, who is now deceased. She was such a brilliant Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport that, as a result, our transport policy in recent years has been hugely strengthened and improved by the rigour that she brought to that role. But the idea that she should have been manipulated by the Government—it would not have been in the Government's interest to have done that. It is actually in all our interests that the Select Committees should be chaired independently and that their members should reflect the views of the House and not the opinions or tastes of a Government.

Dr. Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman add to his list of fine Chairpeople of Select Committees Dr. Ian Gibson, the former Member of Parliament for Norwich, North, who was a very distinguished Chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, on which I served? Of course, that Committee came to a sticky end, due chiefly, I think, to the efforts of that gentleman in trying to propagate the best interests of science and technology in this country, which was sometimes uncomfortable for the Government.

Mark Fisher: Well, I think that the hon. Gentleman makes his point.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (in the Chair): Order. If I can interrupt the hon. Gentleman just for a minute, I want to say that he has been very generous in taking interventions but we are very time-limited and there are many Members who wish to speak in this debate. I say that because I cannot influence how many interventions he takes, but perhaps he might bear in mind our limited time.

Mark Fisher: I absolutely take your point, Mr. Atkinson, and it is very kind of you to attribute the fact that I am taking rather longer than I had intended to my generosity in taking interventions. I feel that I am probably taking too long to introduce this debate anyway, because I know that in Westminster Hall today we have people who sat on the House of Commons Reform Committee and who have very important contributions to make to this debate. Therefore, I will try to bring my remarks to a close.

If we are to fulfil our responsibilities as a Parliament, we need to get control not only of the business of the House and not only of the membership and chairmanship of the Select Committees, which this report identifies so clearly as an issue, but of the Standing Orders of this House, which the report identifies rather less clearly as an issue. The Standing Orders determine the future of this House and at the moment they can only be amended effectively by grace of the Government. They are our Standing Orders, not the Government's Standing Orders; they are the Standing Orders of this House and we ought to control them.

There are things in the report that one could imagine, in an ideal world, being slightly stronger and places where it could go wider, as hon. Members have already mentioned, but the fact of the matter is that I think that the report is a superb beginning and a superb indicator of where we ought to be going. What we now need to do is to take this debate on to the Floor of the House and have it on a substantive motion, which many Members in Westminster Hall today have been pressing the Government for. There is an indication that we may get that substantive debate by the end of January. I hope that we will get it by that time. It would be very foolish of the Government, having done the difficult job of setting up this Committee, appointing the right people to sit on it and to report on this issue and getting, to their own credit, an excellent report, if we were not allowed to debate the report and take the issue forward as quickly as possible. To leave such a debate to the next Parliament would be a terrible mistake. Furthermore, if we are right in thinking that a third, or perhaps even more, of the Members of the next Parliament will be new MPs, those new MPs will not know how this place works as well as some of us perhaps do, having experienced the virtues and vices of the present system. We need to move fairly fast in the next few months and I hope that we will do so.

It is up to us to bestir ourselves and to identify what is peculiar about Parliament and our identity that is different from that of Government. If we do that, we will be laying a foundation for what this report calls itself, which is "Rebuilding the House".

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Peter Atkinson (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) to speak, I want to say that there quite a few Members—I think that there are five or six—who are trying to catch my eye and that the wind-ups should start shortly after 12 o'clock. So, if hon. Members can do a bit of quick mental arithmetic, we will get everybody in.

11.27 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today and I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) for introducing it. Regrettably, I must say that I do not entirely agree with the thrust of what he said. I am afraid that the report to which he has referred was far too timid; it needed to be a good deal more robust. I accept that there was an element of compromise about it and one certainly hopes that at least what has been proposed in the report will go through as a starting-point to what will be a radical reform.

I say that because I think that there is little doubt that the allowances scandal, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, will cause what I suspect will be the largest shake-up in parliamentary practice since the Great Reform Act of 1832, and not before time. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the momentous upheaval in 1832 came as a result of a crisis of confidence in many other institutions. At that time, it was the established Church of England and the monarchy—after the scandals that had surrounded George IV and George III before him—that were in crisis. Of course, today's crisis in confidence in Parliament arrives hot on the heels of an unprecedented economic firestorm in the past two years, whereby the catastrophe that has befallen financial institutions has shaken public confidence in the capitalist system, and with the inquiry that is currently being conducted into our going to war in Iraq there is again a sense that the Executive have been allowed to get away with blue murder.

However, I feel that the reforming steps that we have taken so far will not necessarily be sufficient. In the next Parliament, I suspect that we will see a huge turnover of MPs, even without the turnover that my own party hopes will happen as far as the general election result is concerned. However, there is a concern that we will be filling this House with a lot of inexperienced men and women who will regard themselves as being little more than cheerleaders for their party leaders. The worst possible outcome, in my view, would be the reinforcement of a parliamentary class made up of people with little or no experience outside the political sphere.

It is also possible that expenses woes will encourage many of Edmund Burke's "good men", and women, simply to give up on the idea of democracy. I do not lament the scandal's unveiling, but I mourn the hopeless way that politicians dealt with a time bomb that had been waiting to go off for years, as many of us recognised. It did not have to be that way. We must grasp the rare opportunity in the aftermath of the scandal to implement overdue but lasting reforms.

I reiterate some of what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central said. First, we must pare back the control exercised by the Executive. In my view, successive Governments and Opposition leaderships deserve much of the blame for the parliamentary expenses fiasco that has blown up so spectacularly over the past six months. We have witnessed repeated grandstanding by party leaders who refused to implement independent salary reviews but turned a blind eye to the cynical—and, at its extreme, fraudulent—manipulation of the second home allowance, whose annual uplift was never reduced, reversed or even capped, and which became a salary substitute. The 24/7 media world in which politics operates militates in favour of any close-knit team around party leadership being on message, but Executive patronage must now be curtailed.

I agree with much of what was said about Select Committees. They need to exercise real power. In my view, the appointment of all Select Committee members, not just Chairmen, should be by a secret ballot of all MPs. As was rightly pointed out, chairmanships have too often been handed out by the Executive to former Ministers or senior Back Benchers on the basis of their compliance and willingness not to rock the boat. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central referred to the late Gwyneth Dunwoody and to Ian Gibson. Unfortunately, they are the exceptions that prove the rule about our Select Committee system. One of the biggest oxymorons in British politics is a phrase that one often hears in the media: "the influential Select Committee".

Select Committees should be much smaller. I am grateful that the report goes in that direction. The number mooted was 11, but in my view, Select Committees should number between five and eight members, who should all be fully committed to acquiring or developing genuine expertise in the field. The current situation

[Mr. Mark Field]

involves a ludicrous charade in which ill-prepared MPs, on the rare occasions when they attend, parrot planted questions cobbled together by a Committee Clerk rather than even pretending to hold witnesses or Ministers genuinely to account.

We should also have a much smaller House of Commons, although I risk talking myself out of a constituency. Curiously, the only Members who tend to propose reductions in the size of the Commons are those on the cusp of retirement. I see a few such individuals here. *[Interruption.]* I hasten to add that in their case it is voluntary retirement rather than involuntary. The size of Parliament should be reduced substantially. My party's policy is a 10 per cent. reduction, but I think that that should be a first step. Ideally, a fixed-size Parliament of 450 to 500 Members should be our medium-term goal. The primary priority of all MPs, therefore, should be holding the Executive to account rather than acting as local ombudsmen on constituency issues more appropriately dealt with by local authorities, law centres and citizens advice bureaux, to name but three publicly funded bodies properly designed to deal with parochial concerns.

I would like the process of separating the legislature from the Executive to begin. That final element of my wish list is probably a step too far even for my more reform-minded colleagues, for now at least. If Parliament is to have any future relevance beyond making up the numerical armies required by Governments to pass their legislation, we should regard law-making as an end in itself rather than an essential stepping stone towards holding ministerial office. My preference—it will not happen at this election, but perhaps at some future election—is to have two votes on election day, so people can vote for the Prime Minister and for their local Member of Parliament. It might well result in a split slate, but I do not think that that would be an unhealthy state of affairs.

There is one important caveat, which I mentioned in my intervention, that must be addressed before we begin a headlong rush to empower individual parliamentarians. Many MPs—perhaps even most of us—do not regard any of the foregoing, and still less the constitutional duty of holding the Executive to account, as their main role. Increasingly, the House of Commons consists of a cadre of super-councillors who keep much of their attention and their burgeoning work load in a constituency-focused comfort zone. We are all proud of the work that we do in our constituencies, and it is important to have a finger on the pulse, but if we are to ensure reform and put power back into the hands of Parliament, this generation of MPs and the next must be properly equipped to play their key role in the transformative Parliament that democratic renewal in this country so desperately needs.

11.35 am

Natascha Engel (North-East Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Atkinson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) on securing this debate. It takes place not just as a result of the report "Rebuilding the House", by the Select Committee on which I served, but against the backdrop of the MPs' expenses scandal, which is not going away. Part of the reason is that there is a much wider democratic deficit. I had hoped that the report would address it, but it has failed absolutely to do so, which is why I submitted a minority report. I am grateful for this opportunity to explain briefly why I did so.

One main reason why I thought that the report missed the mark slightly is that we never defined at any point what we meant by reform. Unless we have a clear idea of what it is we mean by reform or modernisation—there is lots of talk about modernisation as well—it is perfectly possible that I could be discussing something completely different from any other Member of the House. Also, we must define our purpose. What do we want our Parliament to do, and therefore, what do we see our role to be as Members of this House?

None of those questions was really addressed. Although the report is important—it considers Select Committees, the question of who scrutinises business and how best to do so—those are details. Unless the context is much wider and we consider exactly what we do and why we do it, we could end up making things worse rather than better. One key element of the report that many Members have spoken about today—it has also been discussed in the Committee and elsewhere—is wresting control away from the Executive. We may all agree that the Executive has too much control, but how we wrest it away from them and who we give it to is a key issue not addressed in the report.

The proposal for a House business Committee—not a Back-Bench business Committee, which I support—to determine who controls Government time in the House would give such decisions to a group of seven sensible Back Benchers elected by secret ballot of the whole House, but it could make the situation worse. We did not go into detail about how we would do so and exactly what the outcomes would be, but they could be dangerous.

I will be brief, because I intervened on my hon. Friend many times. I think that we all agree that Select Committees are good. They are the one thing that enhances the reputation of the House. Again, I urge caution. What are we proposing, and why are we proposing it? What are we trying to improve? Gwyneth Dunwoody and Lord Anderson, formerly MP for Swansea, East—I was not a Member of the House at the time, but I remember watching from outside—became members and Chairs of their Select Committees, so even though the system was imperfect, it worked.

I am worried that by saying, "We don't think it works well enough; let's do something completely different, like having an election by secret ballot of the whole House," we might make things worse. We have not thought through the consequences. The only time when we hold a secret ballot of the whole House is to elect the new Speaker, and many Opposition Members felt that, like it or not, somebody whom they found unpalatable was foisted on them by a Government majority. Given that this is a party political institution and that we tend to revert to type, what guarantee is there that we would not do so when electing Select Committee Chairmen?

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I partly agree with my hon. Friend. However, it is not fair that certain Members, who have been democratically elected, are blocked from ever joining a Select Committee because they are independently minded.

Natascha Engel: I do not know the details of individuals who have been blocked. I was elected in 2005, which was quite late in the 12 years of Labour Government.

The current issue with Select Committees is filling the spaces because there is no mad clamour to serve on them. There are four or five big, sexy Select Committees that everyone wants to be on, including the Home Affairs Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Treasury Committee. Members will not put their names down for any number of other Select Committees, and cannot be persuaded to do so for love nor money.

If Select Committee members are elected by the House by secret ballot, how can we ensure that there is an adequate gender balance, the right amount of age and experience, and a regional mix? The Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons considered that in detail and it is not possible. Through the gain of making Select Committees more democratic, something else would be taken away. We must caution against making the situation, which we all agree is not perfect, an awful lot worse because we might not be able to go back to the system that we think works okay. Nothing is perfect.

Finally, I will make a point that I made time and again on the Reform of the House of Commons Committee. It is six months before a general election. As other hon. Members have said, there will be an unprecedented number of new MPs and they will have fresh ideas on what to do. They will have fought an election against the backdrop of the MPs' expenses scandal and will have to have an idea of how Parliament can be reformed. If we go too far down the line of House business committees deciding who controls what bits of time, we risk tying the hands of the future generation, which is not fair. I would welcome the opportunity to debate this in greater detail on the Floor of the House, but I am grateful for the opportunity to make a few brief points today.

11.42 am

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): The confidence that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) has in the Whips and the usual channels is touching. When she has been here for a few more years, perhaps she will catch the embittered cynicism of some of us who have been here for a long time. I will be brief because other hon. Members want to speak.

I challenge hon. Members to consider one point. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) said that there should be a balance between Government time, Back-Bench scrutiny and representing the wishes of the general public. If there is to be effective scrutiny, we often require the Executive to share information with us. If they do not do so, we are incapable of making judgments.

I wonder how many hon. Members who voted for the war on Iraq would have done so if they had known what we all know now. The House was entirely dependent on the information given to it by the Executive. *[Interruption.]* Well, some of us voted against it. I voted against it as I believed that it was against international law because it did not have UN backing. That was a simple position to take. Many colleagues from all parts of the House felt compelled to support the Government because they genuinely believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction that he could deploy within 45 minutes and so forth. Unless we work out ways to ensure that the Executive are honest and straightforward with the House, it will always be difficult to scrutinise them because we will be hobbled.

I will give a simple example. When the issue is whether the nation should go to war, I see no justification for the Attorney-General's advice to the Government not being shared with the House. Either it is legal to go to war or it is not. One of the most shameful aspects of the Iraq saga, which I am sure the Chilcot inquiry will highlight, is the way in which Lord Goldsmith was effectively bludgeoned into producing advice that satisfied the Prime Minister. Independent legal advisers to the Government should be allowed to be independent. It appears that when Lord Goldsmith put in writing an opinion to Government that was hostile and said that the war was not lawful, he was punished by being excluded from Cabinet meetings until he produced an opinion that satisfied the Prime Minister. Almost the day before British troops were deployed, he said that it was lawful. As Sir Jeremy Greenstock, our permanent representative to the UN at the time, was obliged to say to the Chilcot inquiry, this was not a legitimate war, but it was legal. That is not a distinction that lawyers really understand.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): If we had an independent Parliament, it could have reconvened in that long summer. As it happened, some of us created our own parliament, which forced the Government to allow Parliament to be recalled. Secondly, an independent Parliament could have commissioned its own legal advice, which the Clerks have informed me was not possible. We could then have taken a view on whether the proposed war was legal.

Tony Baldry: The hon. Gentleman, who has been persistent on this issue—quite sensibly, he has tabled items on the Order Paper and campaigned elsewhere—makes some extremely good points. The Iraq conflict demonstrated that the House cannot entirely trust the Executive, who often have their own imperatives, desires and objectives. If a Government command a large majority in the House, irrespective of which party they represent, there is always a temptation to use the majority to get their business through.

[Mr. Jim Hood *in the Chair*]

I conclude with a quotation from Ken Macdonald, who was the Director of Public Prosecutions for five years from 2003 to 2008. It is a damning indictment not just of Tony Blair, but of Parliament as an institution:

> "The degree of deceit involved in our decision to go to war on Iraq becomes steadily clearer. This was a foreign policy disgrace of epic proportions and playing footsie on Sunday morning television does nothing to repair the damage. It is now very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Tony Blair engaged in an alarming subterfuge with his partner George Bush and went on to mislead and cajole the British people into a deadly war they had made perfectly clear they didn't want, and on a basis that it's increasingly hard to believe even he found truly credible."

We have to accept that that subterfuge and deceit was perpetrated on Parliament and that we did not have the effective means, tools or mechanisms to discover what was truly happening. We did not even have the basic legal advice that was given to the Government as providing legitimacy for the war.

[Tony Baldry]

From my 26 years in the House, what happened with Iraq causes me the greatest concern, because as an institution we were sucked into something that many of us will regret for the rest of our lives. Any reforms of the institution must ensure that such a thing never happens again.

11.49 am

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry). I can give him some comfort. I have just done a quick count around the Chamber and a clear majority of Members did not vote for the Iraq war. Let us glory in our purity for a few moments. I speak as a member of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons. It was a pleasure to serve on that Committee and work with colleagues on it.

I shall respond to some of the issues raised and then make a couple of points. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) that he should beware of giving too much praise either to the Prime Minister or the Leader of the House, because thus far the reaction to and reception of our report has been lukewarm. The Prime Minister is on the record as saying that he fully supports some of the recommendations, and the Leader of the House has yet to give us time for either a debate or a decision—a substantive vote—on the report. So the pressure needs to be put on not just my Front Benchers but Conservative Front Benchers—I say that to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field). As someone who has organised many events in this place, I assure him that dark forces are gathering and manoeuvrings are taking place.

Opposition Front Benchers' enthusiasm for reform is wilting as the day of the general election gets closer, because all Governments like to control everything and feel that they have to be control freaks. It is part of our job to challenge that, whoever forms the next Government. I want to challenge the notion that we can somehow do our job better with fewer MPs. I ask hon. Members to reflect on the arguments they have made. What they are saying is that too often we are super-councillors, we are doing too much casework, we should be doing more scrutiny, and we should therefore have bigger constituencies and do less casework. That does not necessarily add up, because there may be some transitional problems. People might want to think their arguments on that through.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), for whom I have huge affection, that I utterly reject her minority report. I thought it was a cop-out and that it merely talked about transferring the decision-making process to another Parliament. That report did not address the clear terms of reference that were set up for our Committee to a very tight time scale, which the Committee addressed. We did not have time to dance on the head of a pin concerning what we mean by reform or anything else.

With due respect, I say to my hon. Friend that she should beware of being sucked into the arguments that were given to us in the evidence from my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Durham (Hilary Armstrong), the former Chief Whip. She gave us a staggering thesis that basically went along the lines of, "It's all in the manifesto and it's the Government's job to get that through, so what are you doing here?" I am not entirely sure that we are paid £64,000 a year merely to nod through what is in a manifesto without any element of parliamentary scrutiny. We need to be careful about going down that road.

On the comments of the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), who is sadly not in this Chamber now, I absolutely support getting rid of MPs' second jobs and moonlighting—in fact, I proposed a private Member's Bill on that issue back in 2007. If we contrast the top 50 outside earners in this place with their voting records, it is clear that the public lose out in that regard.

On the recommendations of the reform Committee itself, we considered three issues. We passed over the matter of the election of the Deputy Speaker, but I very much support the principle of that, particularly the election of the Chairman of Ways and Means, who may have a key role to play in a future business Committee. That matter has been passed to the Select Committee on Procedure and, again, its recommendations need to be implemented sooner rather than later.

We also considered the election of Select Committee Chairs. In 2001, a fiasco occurred within the parliamentary Labour party because of the Executive's attempts to determine who their scrutineers were and to decide that Donald Anderson and Gwyneth Dunwoody were too good at their jobs and would therefore be excluded from the list of people put forward for the Select Committee. The parliamentary Labour party for once was not a poodle, and it rose up. As a result, we brought our internal democracy into that process, and the elected Back-Bench Members in the PLP had a say in the names put forward. We are relatively content with our internal system and I commend it to other parties.

We grappled with the notion of electing every single place on a Select Committee, which would be very difficult to do. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire: in the context of a new Parliament, how are we going to weigh up the credentials of one newly elected MP against another? I am not sure that I would want to say who the 11th member of a Select Committee should be from a particular party. That is a matter for the parties themselves.

If we agree the balance—the public decide that as a result of the number of MPs from different parties who are sent here—it is for the parties themselves to come forward with a sensible, coherent and transparent system. However, it is for the House to decide who the Chairs of those Select Committees should be. Let us be honest: the Select Committee Chairs are not going to be newly elected Members of the House; they will be people with some experience who have a contribution to make. It is healthy for us to have that internal debate, but there is no doubt that the type of people who will triumph in those elections will be those who have shown independence of spirit and who really are formidable scrutineers. It is those people whom we need to chair our Select Committees.

The case for the House to have control over its own business is overwhelming, particularly regarding non-governmental time. I would like us to go further. The farce of private Members' Bills is currently an exercise in using up time. We march the non-governmental organisations and lobby groups up to the top of the hill, and an inordinate amount of time, paper and rain forest

is wasted in debating matters that will never get through, because a Government Whip can stand up on a Friday morning and shout, "Object." For goodness' sake, we have to be better than that. We have to have something better than a system of institutionalised filibustering, which is effectively how a lot of our time and energy is wasted. I would like us to go further in terms of the House controlling its own business.

A small part of the report that I had some influence on concerns how the public can be better engaged in what goes on in this place. Currently, early-day motions are no more than political graffiti. We sign too many of them, there are too many of them and they are on too many subjects. I would like early-day motions to be limited and a system introduced—we allude to this in the report—whereby if an EDM gathers support from across the House in sufficient numbers, a debate can take place on the Floor of the House.

David Taylor: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Martin Salter: No, I will not. The public could then genuinely engage and drive some of the discussions that we have in this place.

During the summer it was my privilege to visit Australia, where they have some interesting mechanisms. Select Committee reports are debated on the day of publication, and there are three-minute constituency statements through which Members of Parliament can make a statement on a matter of import. Topical debates are decided not by the Government but by the House as a whole. I see this process as just the start. I want the report to be implemented now and a process set up, so that reform can continue on into the next Parliament and into the Parliament after that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. I hope to call Front Benchers to give the winding-up speeches around 12 noon. With that in mind, I call Michael Meacher.

11.57 am

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West and Royton) (Lab): In the brief time available, I want strongly to support the recommendations from the Reform of the House of Commons Committee. My objection is that the Committee was not allowed to go far enough, so I shall build on those foundations.

First, it is essential not only that the Chair and members of Select Committees are kept free of the influence of the party managers, but—even more importantly—that the main recommendations of major reports by Select Committees in the course of a year are debated and voted on on the Floor of the House. I would like the Liaison Committee to be given the power to select some of those reports, so that there can be a vote on the Floor of the House on a substantive motion that reflects its recommendations.

Secondly, I support the call made for Members to elect their own business Committee. There is no question but that, over time, the Executive have encroached increasingly on the rights of Members of the House, until they can do little more than rubber stamp what the Executive want without any prior consultation with the legislature. Thirdly, it has traditionally been the practice for members of the public to petition Parliament. That has largely fallen into desuetude, because there is certainly no guarantee that such petitions receive proper consideration or, indeed, any consideration at all. I therefore support the idea of a public petitions Committee, which would hand every petition either to a Select Committee for consideration, to the relevant Minister for action, or to the proposed business Committee for consideration for debate on the Floor of the House. To improve the public's sense of engagement, it would be a good idea if a petitions Committee rotated its meetings around the country, as, indeed, is already the case with the Public Petitions Committee in the Scottish Parliament.

Again, as happens in some other countries, there is a strong case for allowing petitions that have attracted the signatures of a significant proportion of the electorate—5 per cent. or whatever threshold we choose—automatically to have the right to be debated on the Floor of the House and be voted on. That does not, of course, preclude the tabling of amendments or the House reaching whatever decision it may make.

I would have liked the Committee to have been given the right to go further. In particular, I think that Parliament should have the right to adopt its own commissions of inquiry when it considers that to be appropriate and necessary and, indeed, that it should have the right, when a Prime Minister proposes a committee of inquiry, to ratify that decision before the committee begins work. Similarly, I believe that Cabinet Ministers should be subject to ratification by the appropriate Select Committee of the House. That might seem a revolutionary proposal, but it is exactly what happens in congressional confirmation hearings in the United States.

Finally, as other Members have pointedly asked, when do the Government propose a debate and vote on the Committee's proposals? Will the terms of that debate encapsulate the draft resolution proposed by the Committee, incorporating all its proposals, and will there be a vote signifying the House's decision to go ahead with the reforms straight away before the election? It would be helpful if the Minister could give clear and definite answers to those questions.

12.1 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) on securing the debate and on his comments, and other Members on their comments as well.

The report, "Rebuilding the House", opens with a quote from Sir Robert Worcester:

"The public are sullen, some even mutinous."

You can say that again. There has been no such disquiet in recent times about the state of our politics and our Parliament. Although the expenses scandals are part of that, let us not confuse what is symptomatic with what is causative. The problem is that people do not know what Members of Parliament are for, and if they do know what they are for, they know that we are not doing the job in the way they would want it done. That means that we must reform our political processes to make them more effective and relevant. It is instructive that those newspapers that were most vocal on the inadequacies of Parliament were unable to devote a single column inch to the Committee's report when it

[Mr. David Heath]

was published. They do not want to see Parliament made more effective, but I am happy that some Members do.

I believe that there is a much wider agenda on democratic renewal, which other Members have touched on today. It would not be appropriate in this debate to discuss all the things I believe we should be looking at, but they include fixed-term Parliaments, the way in which we are elected to the House, the funding of political parties, which I spent six months discussing with colleagues and which has resulted in very little, and reform of the House of Lords, which I spent another six months discussing with other parties and which also resulted in very little. That agenda would include proper devolution and subsidiarity so that we move power to local government in this country and from the European level to the national level.

Today, however, we are concentrating on Executive control of our legislature. We ought to recognise—those who do not should look at other Parliaments around the world—that this country is almost unique in having a Parliament dominated by the Executive. It is within our power to address that issue, if only colleagues from all parties in the House recognised the need to do so. It is within our power to address it, but we only have the opportunity to do so if the Executive allow it. That is the conundrum at the heart of the matter: we can change the balance of power between the Executive and the legislature only if the Executive let us do so, and we need to look at that.

I do not believe that the Committee's report answers all the questions. It is a good report, but the Committee was constrained by its terms of reference and the time frame within which it was required to report, so there are issues with which its report does not deal. However, it does deal with much of what is going wrong. For instance, it questions what happens to Bills on Report. It is a catastrophe for the House that large and important Bills, often dealing with matters literally of life and death, pass unscrutinised to another place so that it can do the job that we in the elected House should be doing. That is an outrage.

Even when Bills are brought before us that we are told will set a paradigm for the way in which such matters will be treated in future, that is not the case. When the Equality Bill was recently introduced in Parliament, the Leader of the House told us that it would be an example of the way to do it. Well, it was an example of the way we do do it, because half of it was not scrutinised on Report and was passed to the other House for it to do the job we should be doing.

Access to the agenda of the House is a key area, and not just for the public. I absolutely agree with hon. Members who have said that the public should have a way of influencing what we discuss, but Back Benchers, Opposition parties and Members who have a genuine interest in bringing a matter forward, must have better access to the agenda. It is in that regard that the proposed business Committee becomes so important, but it is the one area on which I have doubts about the Select Committee's recommendations, because I would prefer a single business Committee. There should be a business Committee—I have no doubt whatever about that—because that is transparently what works in other legislatures, yet we leave it to the Executive to decide what we debate, which I find extraordinary.

David Taylor: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned public participation. Is he at all attracted by Simon Cowell's idea for an "X Factor" approach, not on whether we should have Gordy from Cowdenbeath, Dave from the home counties or Nicky from south Yorkshire as our leader, but on particular and specific issues? Would that not go some way towards engaging the public in the important things we discuss here?

Mr. Heath: I think that there might be more sophisticated ways of achieving the same result, and I am not desperately attracted to "The X Factor", but I think that the principle must be right.

Natascha Engel: The hon. Gentleman said he supports the proposal for a business Committee. Is that a business Committee for Back-Bench business or for House business?

Mr. Heath: My personal view is that it would be a Committee for all business of the House. I believe that we scrutinise expenditure extraordinarily badly. On the days on which we are supposed to deal with estimates, the one thing we do not discuss is the estimates. It is extraordinary that we devote a minimal amount of time, with minute participation, to eye-wateringly large amounts of taxpayers' money. That is what we are there to scrutinise on those days, but we do such a poor job of it. That problem is not fully addressed in the Committee's report. It does deal with control of Select Committees, which is an important issue, but, in the great scheme of things, not the most important issue. However, it is certainly something on which we should make progress.

Private Members' business is important, as it is about re-establishing respect for the role of the individual Member in the House and for the idea that we are here as legislators and we have things to say on behalf of our constituents. It is for Parliament to determine whether what we have to say is relevant in the wider statute book, rather than for a single member of the Government—a Whip—to shout "Object" and ruin many months of detailed work.

The report has produced a draft resolution for the consideration of the House, so the question is this: why on earth are the Government not simply putting that draft resolution before the House? They said that that was a matter of urgency, but they have dillied and dallied for weeks. They have written to me and to the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara), the shadow Leader of the House, whom I am pleased to see in the Chamber, and asked what we think about the matter. It is not for me alone to think about those issues, but for the House to think about them. I believe that that resolution should be put before the House and that we should have a debate on it, because there is still detailed work to be done on making changes to Standing Orders if the House agrees to the draft resolution, as I hope it will. The most important issue before the House is how we make Parliament work effectively. It is a matter of urgency, of massive import and cannot be delayed.

There was a Roman senator—I believe it was Cato the Censor—who used to finish every debate with "Carthago delenda est": Carthage must be destroyed. If

I had the same discipline, I would end every speech with "Standing Order No. 14 delenda est". We must remove that Standing Order to give back control of this House to its Members, not the people who serve as Ministers, who should not have that responsibility.

12.9 pm

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) on securing this debate and on his contribution. I would like to put on the record the valuable work that he has done prior to this debate. He was the founder of, and then an assiduous contributor to the cross-party efforts of, Parliament First, which for some time has been advocating reform of how we do our business. Among its publications was a report in April 2003, "Parliament's Last Chance". While the title may have seemed a little apocalyptic at the time, perhaps with hindsight the sentiments were not so wrong.

May I also congratulate the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and all the other members of the Reform of the House of Commons Committee on their efforts in producing their report, especially given the relatively short time they had to do it?

In the wake of revelations concerning Members' allowances and expenses, Parliament's reputation has reached a low ebb. Therefore, any proposals for reform must be considered in the light of enhancing public confidence in Parliament and its Members. The revelations shattered many people's faith in our political system, but it is fair to say that the cracks in our institution had been growing for many years.

Before touching on the report's specific recommendations, it is worth highlighting the Government's record to date. I am happy to give credit where it is due. On the constitutional front, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly have received widespread support, and there is some expectation that the Northern Ireland Assembly will help to deliver a lasting peace settlement. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 has helped to make Parliament and the Executive more open and accountable, while some of the working practices of the Commons have been brought up to 21st-century standards, certainly in terms of being in tune with modern family life. Those changes are welcome, and if we were in government we would keep them.

However, welcome though those changes are, and leaving devolution aside, the changes introduced since 1997 have not substantially changed the relationship between Parliament and the Executive. In fact, they have tilted it in favour of the Executive. For example, we have the use of the automatic guillotine, control by the Whips of nominations to Select Committees, unacceptable delays in obtaining timely and proper replies from Ministers when Members ask oral and written questions, and regular briefings to the media on statements before a word has been uttered in the House—for example, today's announcement by the Defence Secretary.

Martin Salter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Vara: I am afraid I will not. As I have very limited time, I must press on.

The Defence Secretary briefed the "Today" programme prior to a statement. The Freedom of Information Act has helped, but there is still much more that needs to be done before we can truly say that we are connecting with the public.

A week after the Prime Minister's coronation in July 2007, he spoke of entrusting

"more power to Parliament and the British people." [*Official Report*, 3 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 815.]

He also spoke of reducing the power of the Executive and of increasing their accountability. Those fine words were of course welcomed by all, but as has happened so often, the Government simply failed to follow through. Even the reforms we are discussing today are not from a Government initiative. Instead, they stem from a letter written by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase to the Prime Minister in which he suggested setting up the Reform of the House of Commons Committee.

The absence of any genuine desire for reform is also illustrated by the shambles that is the Modernisation Committee, which has not met for 18 months. As well as being chaired by a Minister, one of its last actions was to force through proposals for Regional Select Committees. That was done despite the objections of the Opposition parties; they were forced through on the casting vote of the Leader of the House.

In contrast with the Government's dithering and procrastination, my party has shown real leadership. We have been calling for reform of the Commons for some time. In February 2006, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), the Leader of the Opposition, established the Conservative party's democracy taskforce under the chairmanship of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). Also serving on that committee were my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). The taskforce's report called for radical changes to how Parliament operates, and I am pleased that many of its proposals have been adopted by the Wright Committee.

For example, in May my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition made a speech in which he stressed the need for Select Committee Members and Chairmen to be elected. Select Committees are an important part of parliamentary scrutiny, but the undue influence of party Whips on membership is a matter of concern. The last time reform in this area was seriously pressed was in 2003 by the late Robin Cook, who was then Leader of the House. He was outmanoeuvred by his own party Whips and voted down in the House on a recommendation of the Modernisation Committee, of which he was Chairman.

Put simply, Select Committee chairmanships should not be offered as rewards for party loyalty. The situation encountered in 2001, when Government Whips attempted to remove two Select Committee Chairmen who were seen as "difficult" to their own party, should not be allowed to happen again. We should have Select Committee Chairmen and members who enjoy the support and confidence of the House. They should be the best people for the job. At times, that may be inconvenient for the Opposition and the Government, but it is the way forward.

We agree that Deputy Speakers should be elected, and we look forward to considering the Procedure Committee's recommendations in the not too distant future.

[Mr. Vara]

The proposals regarding petitions are especially welcome and long overdue. Again, they follow proposals previously made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. Other more radical comments regarding the triggering of debate or legislation after a certain number of signatures have been received are also welcome. The Committee is right to caution against the effect that such changes may have on the operation of the House, but, if implemented correctly, they would help in the process of reconnecting the Commons with the public.

However, we would go further. We have specifically said that we would introduce citizens' initiatives: if a petition to Parliament secures 100,000 signatures, there should be a formal debate, and if members of the public are backed by a petition of 1 million electors, they should be able to table a Bill to be presented and voted on in Parliament.

We have also called for the House to have more control over its own business. Of course, the Government have the right to pursue their legislative agenda according to what has been set out in their manifesto, but that does not mean they should control the whole timetable. It is important to allow MPs proper time to debate. One of the Government's most retrograde parliamentary innovations has been the use of programme motions for every Bill. They have stifled debate and resulted in numerous instances where new clauses and amendments tabled to Bills have simply not been debated; for example, that happened with the recent Equality Bill.

The way in which proposals will be implemented is almost as important as the changes themselves. It is clear that some can be introduced immediately, such as changes to how petitions are presented. However, as the report says, any changes would have to be implemented in stages. That is sensible, and we need to ensure that the implementation of any new Standing Orders does not inhibit the ability of a new Parliament to hit the ground running.

But we should go much further. The Wright Committee was constrained by its terms of reference. Members will of course be aware that much time was wasted at the outset, not least because of changes to the original motion, but that should not stop the process of ensuring that Parliament is reformed further to serve the public better. For example, we would like to see the abolition of wasteful Regional Select Committees, a reduction in the size of the Commons and equalisation of constituency sizes, a vast improvement in the scrutiny of European Union legislation, a cut in the overall cost of politics and a determined effort to resolve the West Lothian question so that only English MPs can vote on wholly English matters. Those and other measures are necessary if we are really to reform Parliament and make its processes and procedures fit for the 21st century.

To conclude, my party has been leading on this matter for some time. We welcome the majority of the proposals in the report, but we must ensure that changes and their implementation are made in an appropriate and achievable way. This is not the end of the line but only a station stop along the track of necessary reform and modernisation. In last week's business questions, several Members spoke of having a full day's debate on the report. I very much hope that this short debate will not constitute a whole day's debate or, indeed, a contribution to it. Moreover, will the Deputy Leader of the House confirm that every effort will be made to ensure that no ministerial statements and the like interfere on the day? Will she also clarify a particular point from last week's business questions, when the Leader of the House spoke of responding to the debate? Will she confirm that there will be a statement, either written or oral, followed by a proper debate?

The Government have asked the Opposition parties for their views on the report. Will the Deputy Leader of the House take my contribution today as our response to the Wright report? We look forward to hearing from the Minister about what the Government's view is on the report.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Barbara Keeley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hood, and that of Mr. Atkinson earlier in the debate. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) on securing this debate and on opening it so well. It is an important issue for the House to discuss: we can see that from the number of contributions. I counted about 17 hon. Members at certain points in the debate, although slightly fewer are present now.

As this debate has developed in the House, I have been grateful for the chance to listen to the views of all hon. Members who have contributed to it, including today the hon. Members for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Lloyd)—always difficult to pronounce—and for Castle Point (Bob Spink), my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison), my hon. Friends the Members for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) and for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), the hon. Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner), for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and for Banbury (Tony Baldry), my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) and for Reading, West (Martin Salter), my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher), and the Opposition Front Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara).

As many hon. and right hon. Members have said, reform of the House is a broad, important subject, but it is not new: it is a continual process and we should regard it as such. There should be change as procedures become outdated or new systems develop. I support a number of the reforms that have been advanced by both the Modernisation Committee and the Procedure Committee since 1997. Indeed, it was recently 10 years since Westminster Hall started to be used as the parallel Chamber, and it is useful, as we have seen today, in allowing debates that are open to all hon. Members. The Modernisation Committee recommended establishing this room as a second debating Chamber. That change was not met with support throughout the whole House. It is interesting to note that our current Speaker was a key opponent of that reform. But I think that we can agree, particularly today, that this change has been a successful innovation.

Other reforms brought about by the Modernisation Committee have been important too, including changes to the sitting hours of the House and deferred Divisions. We do not always want to find ourselves—particularly those hon. Members with children—voting at 11.20 pm or 11.40 pm, as we did last night: that is not family-friendly. Another reform is the introduction of core tasks for Select Committees. More recently we have had topical questions and topical debates, which hon. Members have mentioned. As with the use of Westminster Hall for wider debates, topical questions and debates will be reviewed in terms of how they are working. I think most hon. Members would agree that the topical questions innovation is working.

Recently, we debated the House of Commons annual report, although that debate was not as well attended as this one, and discussed the importance of public engagement and involvement. There were not many contributions on that matter today, but it is a vital part of what we need to develop in our reform agenda.

Another change stemming from the Modernisation Committee was the report that set up the Regional Select and Regional Grand Committees. I defend the Regional Select Committees and particularly the Regional Grand Committees that met throughout the summer. I read the reports of those Committees, in which some useful debates were held, particularly on factors such as the economic downturn.

Martin Salter: Does my hon. Friend not realise that there is a distinct danger of those hon. Members who served on the Reform Committee beginning to self-harm if we have to listen to any more canters through the wonders of the Conservative party democracy taskforce or the history of the Modernisation Committee? Does she not agree that we want to hear whether both Opposition and Government Front Benchers are signed up to the Wright Committee recommendations? We had a non-response from the Conservatives; will we get a proper response from her?

Barbara Keeley: I will come to that. [HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] I will touch on further changes—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. I ask hon. Members to calm down and let the Minister finish her speech.

Barbara Keeley: There have been some important changes and reforms. It is important, as we look forward, not to lose sight of the fact that there have been some good reforms that have helped matters.

The systems of pre-legislative and post-legislative scrutiny give a more systematic approach to scrutinising Bills. I understand that there are issues regarding the scheduling of Report stage and so on, which hon. Members have raised, but we have got better at our task of scrutiny: the current Bribery Bill is one example of that. Post-legislative scrutiny memorandums have also helped.

The Equality Bill, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, was complicated legislation that replaced eight former pieces of discrimination legislation. Although perhaps not all the processes helped, some of them, including interleaving the easy-read guide, helped hon. Members and the public to work on the Bill. Those things are important.

Most of the changes I have mentioned have been welcomed, although some more than others. Last night we were here from 10.20 pm to 11.20 pm, setting up the London Regional Select Committee. That took a little while, but those innovations are important.

As hon. Members know, events this year related to the crisis surrounding hon. Members' use of allowances have created a pressure for reform of the system, but more generally too, and that is mentioned in the Committee's report. On 10 June, as hon. Members have mentioned, the Prime Minister said that he was happy to support the proposal from my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) to chair that special commission, as we called it then, to advise on the processes that the Committee took forward.

The Committee reported three weeks ago. It recognises that its report contains conclusions and recommendations that are directed not at the Government, but at the House, Ministers and Back Benchers alike. The Committee said that it expects a Government reply on some points, and that it would be due around the end of January. The Committee also said that it expects a debate. The Leader of the House has said that the Government intend to make time for a debate on the important matters we have debated today, and she reaffirmed that at business questions last week. I cannot add more detail to that, but I expect her to announce a date in the usual way. I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire about ministerial statements being made on the day. The Leader of the House said she would try to make sure that that did not happen.

Returning to the report, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West said, the appointment of Deputy Speakers was considered by the Procedure Committee, and we will respond on that debate too at the same time as discussing the other matters I have mentioned.

The report of the Reform Committee touches, importantly, on areas in which further work is needed, such as the Liaison Committee's re-examining the current role of Select Committees. We have heard a great deal in this debate about the role of Select Committees. The task of looking again at them may tie into the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire. There has been strong support voiced in a number of contributions about changing the way the House appoints the members and Chairs of Select Committees, but an important difference was expressed by my hon. Friend, who said that, although we accept that Select Committees work well, we need to consider what we are proposing. As she said, secret ballots of the whole House may not work. The Government could, with a majority, foist their choice of Select Committee Chairs on the House. That needs thinking about. My hon. Friend also asked how such ballots would get a gender and geographical balance and a mix of levels of experience. That deserves detailed consideration. As we have mentioned previously, there will probably be a large number of brand new MPs in the 2010 intake. We need to consider how a ballot would work with a large number of new people.

Mr. Allen: In the less than one minute remaining, could my hon. Friend be crystal clear with hon. Members from all parties and the House itself and say whether there will be a substantive motion on the report that the

[Mr. Allen]

Reform Committee has put forward at some time, and will she tell us when that will be? That is why we have had this debate, and that is the question that virtually every hon. Member who has spoken has raised with her. Will she make that clear so there is no misunderstanding?

Barbara Keeley: I have to say that I disagree. I do not think that is why we have had the debate today. We have had this debate because there is a continuing process of debate. We have opened a debate that will continue into the new year. I have already mentioned that I cannot—

Mr. Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order.

Government Science Priorities

12.30 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): It is a privilege to have the opportunity to introduce this short debate on science funding. The matter has come to light in the past week with the announcement that the Government will try to trim £600 million from their budget for higher education and science. I am sure that they will be deluged with proposals from other Members of Parliament to discuss how that will affect their constituencies. I have already seen some strong statements on the bigger picture from the Royal Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry, and other bodies. We have only half an hour, so I shall not deal with that big picture; I want to deal with one specific and narrow aspect, which is how the Government's funding proposals affect one institution—the National Physical Laboratory in my constituency.

I shall develop significance of the laboratory in the wider science community. It has approximately 350 of the country's leading scientists—predominantly physicists and mathematicians—and it is the cornerstone of the Government's activity in national measurement. It faces a short-term proposal to remove 10 per cent. of its budget, which Prospect, the trade union representing most of the professional scientists, estimates could involve about 40 professional scientists having to go from core programmes. That may be premature, because we do not yet know how many people will be involved, but the cut in financial and human terms will be substantial, both in an extremely important institution for British science, and for Teddington in my constituency.

First, I shall explain a little of the background to show why the matter is important and why it merits special attention. Measurement science is not dramatic or headline-grabbing, but it is at the heart of scientific work. This country has four significant laboratories specialising in different sorts of measurement work, and three happen to be on the same campus in my constituency. They are the National Physical Laboratory, the laboratory of the Government Chemist, which is now part of a privatised unit specialising in chemistry research, and the National Weights and Measures Laboratory. In terms of resources, the National Physical Laboratory accounts for approximately 80 per cent. of national measurement activity. That is crucial, because any applied science, whether for scientific research or industrial purposes, must have a measurement base, whether that involves distance, time, heat or the measurements required by new sciences such as nanotechnology and bioscience. The concept of Greenwich mean time, for example, is actually Teddington mean time, because the laboratory containing the atomic clocks that determine the basic standard of time is there. Measurement is at the core of applied science which, along with engineering, would not exist without a measurement base, and that is what the laboratory provides. It develops and improves measurement techniques, and derives new systems of measurement for new problems, one of which is carbon. Carbon trading must be based on a common denominator of measurement.

Secondly, although the National Physical Laboratory is a national institution, it is part of a global network of institutions, and a leading international institution in

the measurement of science, or metrology. There are comparable institutions in the United States, including the National Institute for Standards and Technologies, and Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt in Germany, but the National Physical Laboratory is recognised as being the leading institution, or certainly among the leading handful of globally important institutions. Those institutions collaborate but also compete, and the laboratories will say that at the very time at which we are embarking on a process of cuts, NIST and PTB should have a massive infusion of resources, because their Governments recognise that if their applied science effort is to improve and expand they must have a strong base for measurement science.

Thirdly, we can all argue for more money to be spent on science. As someone who started his adult life with scientific training at university, I believe in science. However, as the Minister will say, there is infinite demand, and resources are limited, so there must be a return for society. The National Physical Laboratory's work and our national effort on measurement generally is striking in its benefit-to-cost ratio. A departmental report from the National Measurement Office, published by the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills says that every

"additional £6 million spent by Government on measurement technology would deliver up to £410 million of economic impact annually."

Most commercial organisations would die to have such a return with every pound producing £60 of return for society. That is an extraordinary benefit. Grossing up the figures and applying them to the laboratory as a whole, as the laboratory's director did in his presentation to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, shows that about £75 million a year, of which £50 million comes from the Government generates £2 billion a year of economic value. That is an extraordinary multiplier.

At the heart of the controversy is the fact that, despite that extraordinary benefit, which the Government themselves have estimated—it is not a self-serving estimate by the people involved—it has been proposed that instead of adding £6 million to generate that benefit, £6 million will be taken away. Two conclusions may be drawn. Perhaps there is something wrong with the Government's measurement, and perhaps the benefits are not real and something is wrong with the calculation. That is possible—I do not know how they arrived at their numbers—but if they are right, an extraordinarily damaging decision is being contemplated. One of those propositions must be true, and I hope that the Minister will address it when he responds.

That is the context, but I want to take the argument on by stressing that I want a positive outcome. I am not here to make debating points, to lecture the Government, or to apportion blame. That is not the spirit of this debate, and I want to make several specific points. First, I accept that Government spending must be cut, almost certainly in the Minister's Department. I am not for one minute suggesting that that can be avoided—and I have been outspoken in my capacity as a party spokesman in saying that we must be realistic in facing up to the need for cuts—but the issue is how it is to be done. What is particularly worrying is how the process is being managed. It is worth quoting Brian Bowsher, director of the National Physical Laboratory, who said in his evidence to the House of Lords that

"our links with our immediate…BIS colleagues I think are very positive in terms of how we structure the programme. What I am concerned about though is that by the time it gets to them it is difficult to see the evidence base for the reductions and it tends to be, 'We will take ten per cent off everyone'."

That "10 per cent. off everyone" approach by the Department towards the cuts is seriously worrying.

Let me reinforce what I said earlier. I fully accept that there must be discipline in public spending, and that there will almost certainly be cuts. However, that must be done rationally and as far as I can establish, at the moment we have a "10 per cent. off everything" approach, which is not efficient, either economically or administratively.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Some of my constituents work at the National Physical Laboratory, and there are a number of important scientific establishments in my constituency, which is why I am interested in the points raised by the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that the science budget has not been well handled for a number of years? We faced a crisis last year with compulsory redundancies because of the way in which the Science and Technology Facilities Council handled its negotiations with what was the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and is now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Dr. Cable: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says—there is probably a systemic problem. The Department might have been good at administering expansion, but it is not good at administering contraction. There does not appear to be a rational, systematic way of making choices, which goes to the heart of what I want to say.

I accept that we are dealing with a financially austere environment, but the issue is about how it is managed. I am not suggesting that my constituency—or the institutions in it—be spared from economies made across the country. It would be easy to say, "Not in my backyard; deal with the problem somewhere else." I recognise that there are 160 Government science laboratories, and they must all be treated fairly and be subject to the same systematic form of assessment.

I have not come here to attack the Government for their handling of science. Over the past decade, a lot of investment has gone into science. There have been good Science Ministers, such as Lord Sainsbury and Lord Drayson, who are very committed to science and are knowledgeable about the subject. I know that the Prime Minister takes a personal interest in boosting science, as does the Secretary of State. However, having built up a reputation for being pro-science, there is a serious danger of the Government blowing that reputation if this more difficult phase is badly handled.

I am not here to attack the Department either. The director of the National Physical Laboratory has gone out of his way to point out that its relationship with the Department has generally been good and productive. I can attest to that, as some years ago there was a difficult process of managing the private finance initiative project that rebuilt the laboratory. It was handled sensitively and came to a successful conclusion. It is more worrying that in a very difficult environment, the process is not being carefully managed, and we have across-the-board cuts without any attempt to prioritise and establish costs and benefits.

[Dr. Cable]

I would like the Minister to provide some reassurance that a proper process is being established to look at how a more difficult resource environment can be managed. At some point, a process must be established that asks what things are in the science budget that cannot be dealt with by the private sector—if the private sector will do them, there is no need for the Government to do them. However, almost by definition, measurement science for the most part cannot be dealt with by the private sector. If we go back to mediaeval times, long before Governments accepted the need to provide roads, let alone schools and hospitals, a basic function of government was to provide a common or standard system of weights and measures. Providing that basic public good is basic government, and it cannot simply be shifted on to the private sector.

The things that survive and are given priority will presumably be those that produce the highest returns to society. I have quoted figures from the Minister's Department which suggest that this area is very productive, and surely that should be the rational basis on which decisions are made. When establishing priorities, it is clear that some activities must be focused on the things that will matter in the future—the whole carbon economy problem is obviously at the centre of the Government's priorities. I worry that as a result of the cuts, the critical mass needed in British measurement for dealing with the carbon economy might not be there.

My question to the Minister is this: has the Department got a method? Has it got a system of risk assessment? There is no need to rush into these cuts. The Government agree with my party that although we will have to economise substantially on public spending, we should not rush to do so during a recession—that would be the worst thing to do. It would be better to act in a measured way and establish a proper system for assessing risk and costs and benefits. I am pressing the Government to indicate how they will do that.

At the same time as announcing cuts, the Government have announced increases in spending in something called a strategic investment fund. I think that £200 million has been allocated to that, and I am sure that it is a desirable thing to do. However, who decided which money goes into the expanding field and which money is taken out of other scientific institutions? Is there a basis for calculating such things? I notice that technology for video games is included in the list of activities funded by the strategic investment fund. I do not want to be snobbish; I am sure that video games could usefully benefit from improved technology as much as anything else. However, who has decided that £3.5 million invested in video game technology is more valuable than £3.5 million invested in measurement science? There must be a system for doing such things systematically.

To conclude, and to give the Minister a proper opportunity to reply, I have not come here to launch a tirade against the principle of cuts, or to lecture the Government on their poor performance in science, because in general they have been very pro-science. I want to make two simple points. First, I want an assurance from the Minister that a proper, rigorous, deliberate process will be set in train to decide how the cuts in the Department will be made, and that they will not be made on a scattergun basis or on the basis of "10 per cent. off everything". We need a proper, rigorous process for evaluating this.

On a more personal level, I hope that it will be possible to pursue these issues in more detail with the Minister for Science and Innovation. Perhaps, as the icing on the cake, we could persuade the Secretary of State to come to the laboratories in Teddington, which is just down the road from Westminster. He would be extremely welcome, and I am sure that he would learn a great deal.

12.47 pm

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): Let me begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing the debate, and thanking him for the manner in which he made his contribution. He is known to the general public as his party's Treasury spokesman, and once again he has demonstrated his sound grasp of finance issues. He also has a long-standing interest and background in science, and today he has been able to combine the two and we are grateful for that. In spite of the difficulties experienced at the National Physical Laboratory, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will allow me to present the context in which we are having this debate—the position of science in wider society, and what the Government have been attempting to do.

The Government inherited a UK science base in chronic decline, thanks to a sustained period of underfunding. Not only was there a shortfall in recurrent public funding of science, but the science facilities in our universities and research institutions were, in some cases, literally crumbling and falling behind those of many of our competitors. We still had great scientists, but many of the best found that they could fulfil their potential to make new discoveries only by joining the brain drain of scientists leaving our shores and going to other countries. In addition, the next generation of British scientists coming up through our schools was being short-changed, because the numbers of specialist science teachers were falling dramatically across the country.

There was a widespread feeling that the problem was too big to tackle; indeed, there was an effective campaign at the time called Save British Science. However, we came to office and we tackled the problem. The Government have invested in science and research, and that investment has risen year on year. It has risen dramatically, and by next year will be double in real terms what it was in 1997. Equally importantly, the science and research budget remains ring-fenced—protected—to ensure that the money voted by Parliament for science and research is allocated to support science and research.

We also inherited a massive capital investment backlog for science research facilities. We therefore created an unprecedented science and research investment fund, which provided £2 billion to help universities to make good the capital shortfall that they had experienced and to create science facilities of a quality worthy of our scientists. We went further and created a new higher education innovation fund—currently worth £130 million a year—to encourage universities to ensure that the benefits of new discoveries spread beyond the scientific

community into the wider community and society. That was because of the continued suggestion in British national life that we invented things, but the commercialisation and extension of that science was something that we were not able to do as effectively. To improve specialist science teaching in schools, we introduced incentives for teacher training. As a result, there are more science graduates in the system than ever before in our history.

That is why British science is strong today. It is the most productive in the G8, and ranks second only to that of the United States in international league tables. The National Physical Laboratory is a key component of that strength. Indeed, it has been an integral part of our science infrastructure ever since 1901. The work that it does in establishing, maintaining and refining national measurement standards may sound a bit academic and dry, but it underpins many of the scientific developments that we take for granted around us. Without incredibly accurate and consistent systems of measurement, the internet would not exist; nor would satellite navigation, microsurgery and advanced radiology, and many of the new green technologies on which a sustainable future will increasingly depend. That is why the National Physical Laboratory receives support from my Department on [illegible] a scale.

To gain a clearer understanding of the issues, earlier today I discussed the case with the laboratory's parent organisation, the National Measurement Office. I have also heard from my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Science and Innovation, who is willing to meet the hon. Member for Twickenham if that would be helpful. He is keen to discuss the programme or timetable for decisions pertaining to the fiscal strength of the National Physical Laboratory.

Since 1995, the laboratory has been a Government-owned, contractor-operated institute. That means that it is owned by the taxpayer but operated under contract by a private company—in this case, a subsidiary of Serco. The contract runs until 2014, and guarantees the laboratory an index-linked annual minimum income from my Department. That currently stands at £41.5 million, but the actual funding that the laboratory receives this year will be £47.4 million—some 72 per cent. of its total income.

In his Front-Bench role, the hon. Member for Twickenham has acknowledged more than once the need for publicly funded bodies to make efficiencies in these difficult times. The National Physical Laboratory is not immune from that need, but the core funding that it receives next year from the Department will fall by a relatively small amount to £45 million. I remind the hon. Gentleman that that is not its sole income. Its status allows it to garner funds from other sources. I assure him in particular that the current problems that the laboratory faces are not, as his website claims, the result of

"a junior civil servant putting a red line through key bits of science research".

Next year's grants from my Department should not affect the laboratory's sustainability, nor the jobs for the hon. Gentleman's constituents that it supports, because the amount will be substantially more than the contractual minimum that I have mentioned and on which the laboratory's planning assumptions have been based. I am bound to add that the current economic climate would make many bodies envious of the funding that the laboratory has received. It is important to go back to the contractual basis and the funding that Serco said that it needed to run the laboratory, and to recognise that the Government have gone further and will still go further next year, notwithstanding the efficiencies that we have had to make. The Government's continuing commitment to the laboratory's work has, I hope, been demonstrated by, among other things, significant investment in its facilities, with a new laboratory building just completed.

Moreover, the laboratory's core funding does not include nearly £1 million that it will receive over the next three years from my Department's public sector research exploitation fund to help it to strengthen its capacity to commercialise the work that it does. That in turn should help it to diversify its sources of income for future years. I should also mention the research councils. The laboratory cannot receive funds directly from them, but it may benefit from them by working in partnership with bodies—notably universities—that can receive research council grants. Indeed, it is doing so. Two current projects are especially worthy of note. One is the LIDAR—light detection and ranging—sensing technology system for aircraft that the laboratory is developing with the universities of Cambridge and Manchester. The other is the post-doctoral research partnership in measurement technologies that the laboratory has formed with the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

None of that is to say that the laboratory's management are not dealing with serious problems, which cut to the heart of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has rightly brought to the House. Assumptions have been made that are not quite bearing fruit. I am not sure that they are entirely in relation to Government grant because, as I said, we are meeting our minimum standards, but there have been costs, particularly in respect of energy, that were not predicted but have gone up substantially, and costs in respect of pensions, which perhaps are more predictable but nevertheless are making the business plan particularly difficult at this time. Those issues cut to the heart of the laboratory's current problems.

The Department is very keen to work with the hon. Gentleman and the laboratory to find a way to deal with the matter. There may have to be some reorganisation, but we are clear that we remain keen to ensure that we preserve the infrastructure and ensure that fundamental capabilities in key areas such as health, energy—

Mr. Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. We must now move on to the next debate.

Bone Marrow Register

1 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): In the past two years, two people I personally know have been struck down with leukaemia, as was another person I admired from afar—the late campaigning journalist, Adrian Sudbury, who worked with the Anthony Nolan Trust to do more than anyone else to raise awareness of bone marrow issues.

Of the two people I know personally, one is a young lad called Max Tami, who is only 11 years old—he was nine years old when he was struck down with leukaemia. He is the son of my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who is a friend and colleague. The other person is a constituent and friend of mine, Mike Peters, who used to be the lead singer with the 1980s Welsh band The Alarm. Since the band split up, Mike has pursued a very successful solo career. Both those individuals have tried to raise awareness of leukaemia and of the importance of donating stem cells and bone marrow to help cancer sufferers. Max recently had a starring role on "Children in Need", where he nearly outshone Terry Wogan, asking people to come forward to be donors.

Two years ago, Mike Peters was stricken with cancer for the second time in his life. Mike is a whirlwind of energy and has promoted awareness of the importance of donating. He has done that with his band at the top of the Empire State building, as well as from the foothills of Everest and the foothills of Kilimanjaro. He co-founded his own charity, the Love Hope Strength Foundation, with fellow cancer sufferer, American citizen James Chippendale. The two have hosted more than 80 donor drives at music events across the US. Their foundation was sponsored by DKMS and Visa and has become the first resident charity at the famed Red Rocks amphitheatre in Colorado. Donors at those events offer a saliva DNA swab, which allows the health authorities to identify life-saving matches. James Chippendale's own life was saved by that method.

In one year, the Love Hope Strength Foundation has brought awareness of the need for donors to more than 1 million people, and registered 4,500 bone marrow donors. To put that in perspective, the total number of donors registered in Northern Ireland is 9,000, so in one year the two individuals behind the foundation registered the equivalent of almost half that country's donors—a fantastic result.

That success was possible because the American and German systems allow the identification of donors from DNA mouth swabs. In the UK, NHS bone marrow identification is done through the blood donor pool. A DNA swab is far less invasive than extracting a hypodermic needle full of blood from a donor's arm. Mike Peters is prepared to do similar work in the UK if he is allowed to. He is prepared to use the contacts he has made over 32 years in the music business to raise this important issue.

Mike rang me excitedly at the weekend to say that he had just learned that the Anthony Nolan Trust was doing a pilot project on DNA mouth swabs. I had to tell him that I already knew because I was at the trust's event in the House of Commons last week. I was presented with one of the mouth swab packs and I want to present the Minister with one after the debate, because they are a big step forward in increasing the number of people on the bone marrow register.

I want to raise a number of issues with the Minister, which I shall do by reviewing the parliamentary questions that I have placed before her over the past two or three weeks. Each of those questions raises additional questions, so I want to give a flavour of the remaining unanswered questions.

In answer to one of my questions, the Minister stated that

"the British Bone Marrow Register strategy for maintaining the registry at 300,000 donors is readily attainable without any change to current donor selection guidelines."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2009; Vol. 501, c. 650W.]

Why is the NHS bone marrow register kept at 300,000 if two patients a day are unsuccessful in finding a suitable bone marrow match?

In answer to parliamentary question 304105, in which I asked what proportion of UK patients received their stem cell or bone marrow donation from UK or foreign donors, I was told that the information was not collected. How do we know whether we have sufficient UK stem cell and bone marrow donors if the Department does not collect figures on the provenance of the donor tissue? The country of origin of stem cell and bone marrow donations is also not collected. Are some countries being relied on more heavily than others to provide donor material? Is Britain a net exporter or a net importer of such material?

When the Department collects figures, disparities appear. I tabled parliamentary question 300913 to ask for a breakdown of the numbers and percentages of bone marrow donors for the regions of England and for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The English regions—the northern region includes my area of north Wales—seem to recruit 30 per cent. of the existing pool of blood donors on the bone marrow register. In Northern Ireland, the figure is only 3 per cent., and in Scotland, it is only 4.5 per cent. The figures for Wales are not held. The answers to my parliamentary questions confirm that no meeting has taken place between the Secretary of State and the devolved Administrations to discuss correcting that imbalance. Why is there a disparity between the number of donors in Northern Ireland and Scotland and in the English and north Wales regions? Why are the Welsh figures not collected? I know that the hon. Lady is an English Minister, but there is interdependence between the UK's four constituent parts. Why has no meeting taken place between all the health administrations to address the issue?

I tabled parliamentary questions 304184 and 304100 on the collection of umbilical cord blood. I asked for the total amounts of umbilical cord blood that were processed and stored in the NHS cord bank in each of the past 10 years and for the number of units that were actually used to save patients' lives. In 1997, there were 862 units; in 2009, there are 1,712. In 1999, three units were used in operations to save people's lives; in 2009, 43 units were used. Why has the annual number of donors only doubled in 10 years? The Anthony Nolan Trust says that 50,000 umbilical cord units are needed? Why have we not reached that target after 12 years?

In parliamentary question 304106, I asked for the number of cord blood units that the NHS cord bank has issued for transplant into patients since 1998. The

number rose from a low of three per annum in 1998 to 44 in 2007, and the figure has now stabilised at around that level—I think it was 47 and 43 in the past two years. Why are the numbers so low when the need is so high? What is happening to the unused cord blood from newborn babies? Is it simply being thrown away while lives are lost for want of a proper match?

In parliamentary questions 304099 and 304103, I asked for the budgets for the marketing activities intended to attract blood donors, because bone marrow donors are taken from the blood donor pool. I am pleased that the amount has gone up from £10.5 million to £14.5 million over the past eight years—an increase of nearly 50 per cent. However, the number of donors has decreased from 1.8 million, or 3.7 per cent. of the population, to 1.4 million, or 2.7 per cent. of the population, over the past eight years. Will the Minister check the effectiveness of the campaigns? Will she consider separating the advertising campaigns for blood and bone marrow? Will she also consider greater joint working with charities with volunteer bodies such as the Anthony Nolan Trust and Adrian Sudbury's Register and Be a Lifesaver project and with civic-minded individuals such as Mike Peters. There is a pool of talent that is not being fully utilised.

Last week I attended a parliamentary function held in the Terrace marquee by the Anthony Nolan Trust, to highlight its work. I thank the trust for its pioneering work in the past 35 years. It is the largest and probably best regarded bone marrow register in the world, and it was the first in the world. It is successful because it focuses on one issue and one goal. It has limited itself to the goal of providing bone marrow donors for transplants in the UK and abroad. The trust informed me that two UK patients every day are denied the chance of a life-saving transplant because of the lack of suitable adult matches or cord bank blood.

The Anthony Nolan Trust has not rested on its laurels. It currently has more than 400,000 people on its register—compared with 300,000 on the national health service register. The trust has taken 35 years to reach that figure and its vision is to recruit 1 million registered donors by 2014. To achieve that, it will need the help of the Minister and the Department.

The register is not just about numbers. It is also vital to have a greater number of young male donors and black and ethnic minority people, to increase the life chances of such people should they be threatened by leukaemia. One of the key issues that Mike Peters has raised, which I have raised in questions, is the need for saliva tests to identify donors. That need is being addressed by the Anthony Nolan Trust, which has piloted saliva testing. I hope that the Minister will convince her Department that what is good enough for the Anthony Nolan Trust register is good enough for the national health service. I hope that my friend Mike Peters will become involved in that charity's bone marrow register events across the UK.

The Anthony Nolan Trust already works closely with the Department and with the devolved Health Departments in the United Kingdom. In Scotland it works with the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service to encourage blood donors to join the Anthony Nolan register. As I mentioned, the registration rate in Scotland is only 4.5 per cent., as opposed to 33 per cent. in England, so there is much work to be done. The trust is also trying to persuade the Scottish service to allow direct recruitment of people on to the bone marrow register without them previously going on the blood register. The Anthony Nolan Trust seeks even closer co-operation with the English NHS. It has the aspiration of a single, highly effective register, managed by the trust. I urge the Minister to consider the proposal carefully.

To supplement the adult register, the Anthony Nolan Trust has established a purpose-built cord blood bank, which was opened by the previous Secretary of State in September 2008. In the past four years, the trust has imported 268 cord blood units for UK patients – more than have been provided by the NHS cord blood bank in 13 years. That gives a measure of its effectiveness. Last year alone it imported 90 cords for UK patients. That is costly, and would be unnecessary if an effective UK programme existed. The UK is currently underperforming in the harvesting of cord blood, as my parliamentary questions illustrated. The current world leaders are Spain and Canada. The UK collects only a tiny amount—I think it is something like 0.13 per cent. The rest of that elixir is simply thrown away, although most mothers, if asked, would willingly let that blood—their baby's blood—be used to save life. The Anthony Nolan Trust has a plan to collect 15,000 clinical samples by 2012 from a network of 10 collection centres across the UK. That will cost £15.2 million, and I believe that the Department approached the trust and asked it formally to apply for the funding. The submission was made in June 2009, but since that date there has been little progress. I do not think that the trust has heard from the Department. That excellent project makes sense in many ways: it meets the desires of mothers make positive use of the umbilical cord; it gives a community focus; it saves the lives of thousands of patients; and it will create a world-leading resource in the UK and build a resource for the future. In addition to its life-giving properties for leukaemia sufferers, a cord bank could offer help to those suffering from diabetes, Parkinson's disease, heart disease and many other conditions.

As well as its work on increasing the number of bone marrow and cord blood donors, the Anthony Nolan Trust does excellent work to educate young people about how easy it is to donate bone marrow, blood and organs. It has fully supported the Adrian Sudbury Campaign to raise awareness among 17 and 18-year-olds. The awareness raising campaign, which was supported by the Department of Health, was a huge success and will be extended to cover England and Wales.

At a cancer campaigning day two weeks ago held at Church House, my friend and constituent Mike Peters asked whether the Secretary of State would meet him and me to discuss bone marrow issues. The Secretary of State agreed. Will the Minister please set up a meeting with the Secretary of State, herself, Mike Peters and the Anthony Nolan Trust to take forward the issues I have raised in debate: increasing the size of the adult bone marrow register and the possibility of the merger of the English or UK registers; taking forward the Anthony Nolan Trust proposal to establish a £15.2 million centre in the UK for a cord blood donation programme; and greater use of education and awareness schemes like those operated by the Adrian Sudbury initiative and the programmes that Mike Peters has implemented with young people at American rock festivals?

[Chris Ruane]

We have a golden opportunity to make the UK the world centre for bone marrow and stem cell registers. We have the disparate parts; there are fantastic voluntary organisations and individuals, sometimes working in ignorance of each other. I look to the Minister to establish funding and co-ordination to achieve those noble goals.

1.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Gillian Merron): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) on securing this important debate, and on his campaigning on a crucial issue. I have listened closely and I am happy to respond to points that he raised, but I would like first to give some helpful context. I shall of course write to my hon. Friend on any matters that I do not get a chance to discuss. As always, I should be happy to arrange a meeting with him.

The context is the debate about stem cells, of which bone marrow is one source. Donation of bone marrow and other stem cell sources in the UK is managed by NHS Blood and Transplant. The NHS works closely with important partners such as the Anthony Nolan Trust. There are three bone marrow registries in the UK, which are monitored by clinical experts at NHSBT. Combined, they are the third largest registry in the world, and consist of the British Bone Marrow Registry, which is operated by the National Blood Service and includes services for Scotland and Northern Ireland; the Welsh Bone Marrow Donor Registry; and the Anthony Nolan Trust bone marrow registry, which holds the records of 400,000 donors.

Blood donation is of course an integral part of the work to identify bone marrow donors. The UK has an international reputation for work in that area. It is worth saying, in response to some of the points that my hon. Friend raised, that the registers form part of a network, via the organisation Bone Marrow Donors Worldwide. It provides search access to more than 13 million donors and cord blood units worldwide. The registers in the UK do not stand alone, but are part of a wider picture. The Government have a very proud record of working closely with charities, volunteer bodies and individuals, including on targeted campaigning and collection programmes. In October, we helped to fund an international event on the benefits of cord blood for transplant patients. On the same day the event took place, I opened the NHS cord blood bank's newest collection site at St. George's hospital, in Tooting. For me, the opening was testimony to the value of the Government's investment in research into life-threatening conditions.

As with all NHSBT's cord blood collection sites, St. George's was chosen because it serves families of a diverse multicultural mix. I was struck by how such a simple procedure could provide such a valuable resource. As my hon. Friend acknowledged, it adds an essential contribution to the work of supplying the NHS with stem cells for transplant. It saves lives, and it makes an important difference to families affected by blood disorders such as leukaemia. That is why, like my hon. Friend, I am determined to facilitate and promote discussion and debate on the way forward for the harvesting and use of stem cells for transplant.

I pay tribute to everyone who works to improve awareness and education, including those named by my hon. Friend. I also pay tribute to organisations such as the Anthony Nolan Trust and NHSBT. I look forward to seeing the greater results of closer working together in the future.

Donors for the British and Welsh registries are identified through the national blood donor programme, operated by NHSBT. The Anthony Nolan Trust also campaigns to promote donor registration. Indeed, I registered as a donor more than 20 years ago. All campaigns share the goal of raising awareness of the importance of donation and what it can mean for the lives of others.

I agree with my hon. Friend that it is vital that the message is heard by the young. They are indeed the donors of tomorrow. To help with that, the NHS has developed initiatives such as the "Give and Let Live" education campaign, designed to raise awareness among 14 to 16-year-olds. The campaign has been made available to 6,000 schools in the UK. "Register and be a Lifesaver", an initiative backed by the Anthony Nolan Trust, is campaigning for better education among young people. The Department of Health helped to fund a pilot programme, which was run by NHSBT.

Those campaigns came about following the death from leukaemia of Jeanette Crizzle and Adrian Sudbury. Both cases were tragic examples of how difficult it can be to provide treatment to all who need it. In Adrian's case, it was the rareness of the condition that proved an insurmountable hurdle. For Jeanette, the challenge was the richness of her genetic heritage.

That brings me to the question of matched donors and ethnic minorities. When treating acute blood disorders, it is important that the stem cell units come from a matched donor, usually a brother or sister. Unfortunately, only 25 to 35 per cent. of patients have a matched sibling. That means having to rely on unrelated donors. Finding a donor who is genetically matched, healthy and willing to donate is a mixture of hard work, professional dedication and chance. It is a mammoth task.

The task becomes even harder when the patient's genetic background is complex. Currently, most of the 13 million donors worldwide come from a Caucasian background. Patients from that group have a 90 per cent. chance of finding a matched unrelated donor. However, for patients from ethnic minorities or with a mixed genetic inheritance, the chance of finding a match is only 30 to 40 per cent. That is why I was so proud to open the new centre in Tooting, as it is making a direct contribution to dealing with the problem.

On the question of other sources of stem cells such as cord blood, the Government have taken and are continuing to take strategic and targeted action to tackle the challenge. As I said earlier, it is important to remember that bone marrow is not the only source of stem cells for transplant. Umbilical cord blood is an excellent source of stem cells, and has some clinical advantages over bone marrow.

The NHS cord blood bank is the fourth biggest in the world, with about 14,000 stored umbilical cord blood units. The Government are investing nearly £10 million in order to increase the size of the bank to 20,000 stored units by 2013. The cord blood bank aims to redress the imbalance on bone marrow registries by focusing collection at hospitals with catchment areas that are more ethnically diverse.

My hon. Friend asked about cord blood being discarded. I shall put that into context. In the UK, about 50 per cent. of the samples collected are discarded, but that is due to such things as contamination, infection or low cell counts. It compares favourably with the discarding rate in Spain, for instance, which is about 70 per cent.

The NHS cord blood bank has one of the best records of harvesting and banking cord blood in the world, and its inventory of unique tissue types is second to none. So far, about 280 units of cord blood have been issued, mostly for export. The number increases year on year, because medical advances mean that cord blood can be used to treat a wider range of patients. Just as cord blood collected in the UK can be used to find matches for patients overseas, so we are able to draw on international cord blood banks to find matches for patients here.

I know that my hon. Friend understands the need to look to the future—a time when cord blood may become even more important. A review commissioned by the Department of Health last year recommended further consideration of the collection and use of cord blood, and a joined-up approach to service provision. I assure my hon. Friend that since then discussions have been held with a range of partners on the collection, storage, commissioning and use of stem cells for transplant.

I know that my hon. Friend is interested in the question of swabs versus blood tests. I look forward to receiving the pack that he has promised me. I welcome the pilot that the Anthony Nolan Trust is running. I confirm that the NHS identifies donors through the blood donor programme. Using buccal or saliva swabs would, in the view of clinicians, add another unnecessary layer of testing, without an overall cost or clinical benefit. Blood samples are more efficient and give us more genetic material to work with.

The cost of the tissue typing is the same whether the DNA used is extracted from swabs or from blood. Although the quantity of DNA isolated from swabs is sufficient for the initial tissue testing, it does not give enough DNA to perform additional tests, such as confirmatory or high-resolution typing, which are normally requested by the transplant centres and are required prior to transplant. Additionally, transplant centres sometimes request DNA samples for repeated confirmatory tests. I remain interested in the Anthony Nolan Trust pilot.

My hon. Friend suggested that the UK was underperforming in some way. That is not a description that I recognise. We are the fourth largest in the world for cord banks; we have the second highest number of human leukocyte antigen unique samples stored; we have the second biggest registered cord blood bank after New York; and we have an excellent reputation in science. However, we can always do more, and we will continue to do so.

My hon. Friend also mentioned age limits. I confirm that the NHS recruits donors between the ages of 18 and 49. Donors remain on the registry until the age of 60. The other registries in the UK have lower age limits. Given the number of questions raised as a result of today's debate, I have asked officials to open discussions about bringing age limits in the UK into line with those of the NHS. The decision, of course, will be a matter for the registries themselves.

I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and for his immense interest in what I believe is an important matter. I join him in wanting to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of this work, and that we are able to meet our obligations in matching stem cell donations to patients in need of a transplant.

Fire Safety (Rented Accommodation)

1.30 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): I wish to declare an interest, as the part-owner of two properties that are currently rented out.

Let me start by praising the measures that have improved fire safety in residential properties over the past 20 years. More than 80 per cent. of homes now have smoke alarms compared with 9 per cent. in 1987, and fire deaths halved from 1988 to 2008. Many fire authorities have carried out sterling work in increasing public awareness of not only the need to have working smoke alarms but a range of other fire safety measures.

I pay tribute to the Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service, which has worked hard on a range of prevention measures. Following a serious fire in my constituency, the authority installed more than 1,200 new smoke alarms in just two months. Building regulations currently dictate that new-build extensions and alterations should be equipped with hard-wired smoke and fire alarms. Furniture regulations also play their part in reducing the number of avoidable domestic fires, or lessening their impact, and Government have wisely invested in an effective publicity scheme. All those measures have had the impact of reducing fire deaths and increasing the number of working smoke alarms across the country.

Figures clearly show that as awareness about fire safety increases, deaths and injuries decrease, yet casualties and preventable fires continue. We have seen a number of tragic fire deaths in recent months, quite often involving rented properties. The figures speak for themselves. In 2007, there were 331 deaths from fire. Of those, 222—or two thirds—occurred in places in which there was no working smoke alarm. In 137 cases, there was no detection system at all. Is it not possible to argue that a working smoke alarm could have saved one of those 222 lives or helped to prevent one of the 9,066 non-fatal casualties from that year?

There are gaps in the regulations governing fire prevention. Outside houses in multiple occupation, it is only guidance or good practice that governs the provision of smoke and fire detection. The majority of landlords in the private and social sectors ensure that smoke alarms are available, which not only provides safety and reassurance for tenants, but is in the interests of landlords. However, a minority of rented homes do not have smoke alarms and they may well house some of the most vulnerable members of society. There is something of a correlation between the propensity to fire and the lack of fire safety devices. The Association of British Insurers highlighted that in 2001, 81 per cent. of homes had smoke alarms, but fewer than 60 per cent. of homes suffering fires had alarms.

Promoting voluntary good practice among landlords has been very positive. The number of landlords becoming accredited is increasing and that reassures tenants not only that their property is relatively safer, but that their landlord appreciates their duty of care to them. Sadly, the majority of private-sector landlords do not join landlord associations in which best practice can be shared and standards raised. The good landlords pay a heavy price in reputation for the actions of the bad.

Social housing providers also need to ensure that they are working to best practice. When a recent house fire in my constituency highlighted the issue of fire safety, it was found that around a quarter of the properties of Riviera housing trust had no smoke alarm. Much to its credit, the association has now pledged to ensure that all properties have working smoke alarms by March 2010. Nevertheless, Government guidelines are clearly lacking if a housing association can provide a service to vulnerable people without needing to ensure safety from fire.

The key word here is "guidelines". The Housing Health and Safety Rating System highlights 29 factors that may be taken into consideration by local authorities when assessing risks to all residential properties. If fire is seen as a category 1 hazard, enforcement action can be taken. Other guidance documents over recent years have stressed the importance of smoke alarms, but local authorities are free to do as little as they wish.

A number of cases have highlighted the need for better regulation. At a recent inquest into a fatal fire in Yarcombe near Honiton in Devon, the coroner resolved to contact Ministers from the Department for Communities and Local Government to urge them to review whether smoke detection could be mandatory in rented domestic dwellings.

Earlier this year there were fire deaths in two incidents in Northumberland; at Ashington and Bedlington.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating 16-year-old Shannon Yates from Rhyl who, on Sunday night, risked life and limb to break into a neighbour's property to rescue a man who had succumbed to smoke? Does he also agree that the types of residence that are most vulnerable to fire are houses of multiple occupation, and still more needs to be done to ensure that landlords install smoke alarms?

Mr. Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be shorter than that.

Mr. Sanders: I am more than happy to congratulate the young lady on her spirited civil action. The hon. Gentleman is right when he says that houses of multiple occupation have been identified as most at risk, which is why they already come under statutory legislation. My point today is that we need to extend that legislation to all housing.

In September, an elderly woman died in a fire in Porlock, Somerset. Again the fire authority found no smoke alarms. Indeed, fire officers have told me that they have never attended a fatal fire where working smoke alarms have been present. The number of cases reported in the local press of smoke alarms saving families from death and/or injury is significant. There should be a straightforward solution to the problem.

In 2004, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Select Committee, of which I was then a member, produced its report on the fire service with the following recommendation:

"We believe that functioning smoke alarms save lives and reduce injuries. The Committee congratulates those Fire Services which operate initiatives to fit free smoke alarms for the vulnerable. We welcome the requirement for alarms to be hard-wired in alterations, extensions and new buildings. We recommend this requirement be extended to include all existing tenanted properties, housing of multiple occupation and housing for vulnerable members

of society. If the design of such buildings makes installation of hard-wired alarms impossible, we recommend use of alarms fitted with 10 year batteries."

As those recommendations were not adopted, I feel that it is time to review the matter. Moreover, I should like to stress one further point in the recommendation and that is the hard-wired nature of smoke alarms. Many landlords in both private and social sectors rely on battery-powered alarms to serve as safety devices. Although they are good and far better than having no detection devices at all, they throw up some problems. They are not always as accurate as mains connected systems, and over-sensitive alarms can easily be turned off by disgruntled tenants having to hear an alarm every time they toast a piece of bread. Furthermore, such alarms require regular testing, and with vulnerable tenants that is not always something that can be devolved to personal responsibility.

A more serious issue is that of failure to trigger. Figures show that since 1997 the failure rate of mains-linked smoke alarms has been between 9 and 13 per cent. That compares rather starkly to the failure rates of 37 to 44 per cent. for battery-operated smoke alarms. The majority of the latter cases are due to flat or absent batteries. That is not to say that smoke alarms are the only solution; we need to explore issues such as more regular inspections of electrical systems in rented properties and more awareness of how to prevent fires starting in the first place. However, where saving lives and preventing injury from fire is the issue, it seems indisputable that smoke alarms have a significant beneficial effect. Making smoke detectors compulsory in all rented properties has broad support. I have already mentioned the ODPM Select Committee report. Early-day motion 263, which endorses mandatory detectors, has cross-party support.

I must also register my thanks to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) for pledging his support to the cause in my local newspaper. Sir Jeremy Beecham, the then chair of the Local Government Association, also spoke in favour of compulsory smoke detectors in 2003. Landlords have a duty of care to ensure that gas systems are kept in good order—they even need an energy performance certificate—so why do we not ensure that all landlords provide adequate protection from fire? For the majority of landlords, such a requirement would not make any difference as they already fulfil all the guidelines. However, for tens of thousands of existing tenants and future tenants, it could provide considerable reassurance and, more importantly, save dozens of lives every year.

It is good progress that new dwellings are guaranteed a good standard of fire detection and warning, but it is fundamentally important that that protection is extended to those people who live in older properties and that guidelines should be turned into a necessity.

Research carried out earlier this year for the Australian Fire and Emergency Authorities Council showed that just less than a third of countries across the developed and developing worlds have legislation in place to make smoke alarms mandatory. So it is not an unusual or draconian law to consider introducing. As the deputy chief fire officer of the Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service has said on this issue:

"Some of our most vulnerable people are affected by this gap in the law."

We know that fire death rates are higher for the over-80s than for any other group.

Legislation must be part of a solution to the problem of fire casualties. The financial incentive of cheaper insurance for more responsible behaviour, coupled with good education, can only go so far. Therefore I urge the Minister to find a swift solution to this problem. The figures that I have set out today show that the absence of a smoke alarm is at least a factor in more than 200 deaths and in thousands of injuries every year. We have legislated to make landlords ensure that gas appliances and flues are safe, so why can we not legislate to ensure that tenants have a good chance to survive any fire in their property?

There are a few realistic measures that we can consider taking. For example, will the Minister consider amending section 2 of the Housing Act 2004 to make the absence of appropriate fire detectors and alarms as well as the presence of defective fire detectors and alarms separate category 1 prescribed fire hazards? Will he look at other delegated legislation to ensure that the responsible person—in other words, the landlord—equips dwellings with appropriate fire detectors and alarms? Will he look at including questions in the home information pack's property information questionnaire that relate to the presence and standard of fire detectors and alarms?

Fire authorities across the country have done their part by raising awareness, giving advice and fitting alarms. Now it is the Government's turn to act and I urge the Minister to do what he can to help prevent future tragedies.

1.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Shahid Malik): Mr. Hood, I want to commence by saying what a pleasure it is to engage in this debate under your stewardship.

I also want to congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) on securing this debate. He has an obvious passion and commitment for this cause and for his constituency. That passion does not surprise me, because some 15 years ago he had equal passion on issues relating to the third sector and helping the poorest in society. I had the privilege of working with him then.

In England, we have a strong record on fire prevention, a record that we can be justifiably proud of. Any deaths or injuries in house fires are regrettable, but the latest statistics show that fire deaths in the home in England are at their lowest since 1980 and, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, 40 per cent. lower than in 1997.

Our key strategy to drive down preventable fire deaths across all housing sectors has been proactive community fire safety activities—education, information and publicity—as has been highlighted. Most fires in the home are preventable. Community fire safety is about providing basic fire safety information to householders, to help them to alter their behaviour and think more about how fire safety could affect them and their families. In particular, it is about reminding people of the importance of having working smoke alarms installed in their homes and testing them regularly.

The installation of properly maintained smoke alarms in every household has been the centrepiece of our efforts to reduce fire deaths in the home, as they provide the vital early warning of fire and consequently help people to escape. The Government have conducted high-profile national television campaigns that promote

[Mr. Shahid Malik]

the use and maintenance of smoke alarms, which have proved very successful. We have recently launched a new national advertising campaign, "Don't Drown in Toxic Smoke".

We have targeted advice and guidance at more than 1 million social homes, by advertising in social housing newsletters through a partnership with the "Wise up to Fire" campaign. That work, conducted in collaboration with editors of tenants' newsletters, involved a fire safety advertorial that provided top fire safety tips, including highlighting the importance of having a working smoke alarm installed, and guidance on the responsibilities of social housing landlords.

Since 2004, the Government have invested £25 million in grants to fire and rescue authorities to enable them to purchase smoke alarms to install in domestic dwellings. I want to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to his local fire and rescue service—the Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service—for the work that it has done, which he described in his speech.

That initiative resulted in nearly 2 million home fire risk checks being carried out in England, with more than 2.4 million smoke alarms being installed, saving an estimated 53 lives per year. I know that the hon. Gentleman recognises the importance of that initiative and indeed applauds the initiative.

The increase in ownership of smoke alarms as a result of such campaigns and other actions is a major success story. As I think the hon. Gentleman himself mentioned, in 1987 only 9 per cent. of dwellings were fitted with smoke alarms. By 2007, that had risen to 85 per cent., an almost tenfold increase. Indeed, the English house condition survey suggested that in the social rented sector more than 88 per cent. of homes had smoke alarms by 2007. The social sector also leads the way in fitting hard-wired and mains-powered smoke alarms, with nearly 40 per cent. of dwellings in that sector having such alarms compared with less than 16 per cent. of dwellings in the private sector. The hon. Gentleman powerfully articulated the increased efficiency and effectiveness of mains-powered smoke alarms.

There is absolutely no room whatsoever for complacency about health and safety matters in our homes, which obviously includes fire safety matters. In the first instance, each of us must take responsibility for the safety of our own households. So, fire safety in individual domestic properties is generally a matter for the occupier of the premises.

Any new measures that we introduce through regulations must, of course, be proportionate and justified in terms of the lives that they save and the injuries that they prevent. For instance, it has been a requirement in building regulations since 1992 that new dwellings should be fitted with mains-powered smoke alarms. That requirement applies to the erection of new buildings, extensions and to certain alterations and changes of use.

Legislation also exists to govern fire safety in certain types of existing residential accommodation. As the hon. Gentleman indicated in response to an intervention, blocks of flats and houses in multiple occupation are covered by that legislation. The Housing Act 2004 introduced the housing health and safety rating system, which is the principal tool for assessing fire safety risk and for regulating standards in all types and tenures of residential accommodation, in both individual dwellings and housing blocks.

Creating legislation to insist that all local authority and social housing landlords install smoke alarms is by no means straightforward. I do not think for a second that the hon. Gentleman was suggesting that creating such legislation would be straightforward; I think that his argument was that it is necessary. There are complex issues involving maintenance and liability. Also, of course, many residential buildings contain premises for other uses, such as commercial and retail, which complicates the picture further.

The HHSRS reflects our preference for proportionate and risk-based regulation supported by the encouragement of best practice rather than blanket requirements across the piece. That is also reflected in the advice issued in 2001 to which the hon. Gentleman referred, which emphasised the value of installing smoke alarms in social housing and clarified the legal implications for local authorities.

All good landlords will wish to ensure the health and safety of their tenants and the safety of their property, which is their asset. In the vast majority of cases, local authorities and housing associations, as responsible landlords, have taken the opportunity to install smoke alarms. Although the decent homes standard does not require that smoke alarms be installed, an assessment of fire risk is necessary to meet the statutory minimum standard for housing under the housing health and safety rating system. A fire assessment under the HHSRS considers the likelihood of a fire starting, the chances of its detection, its speed of spreading and the ease and means of escape.

The decent homes programme does not and could not cover all aspects of a building, but we will keep the matter under review as we maintain the standard in future. That does not prevent landlords from installing smoke alarms when undertaking other works, as local authorities and housing associations are encouraged to do, and the evidence suggests that many social landlords are doing so.

Of course, attention to fire safety is not confined to individual dwellings. Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, landlords, as "responsible persons", have a duty to risk-assess fire safety in the common parts of buildings, take adequate precautions and manage any remaining risk. Although the order applies only to the common parts of premises, in many residential premises the responsible person will in practice need to take account of fire safety measures in place in the individual dwellings. Fire and rescue authorities have a legal duty under the order to enforce its provisions in the common areas of residential accommodation such as blocks of flats and houses in multiple occupation. Local authorities have inspection and enforcement responsibilities under the Housing Act 2004.

In recognition of the complexities, we have worked closely with the Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and the Chief Fire Officers Association to develop guidance to ensure that the risk of fire in multi-occupied buildings is actively and appropriately managed. That work continues.

In our response to the consultation on reform of council housing finance, we proposed, in the context of local authority self-financing after 2011, the inclusion of ongoing maintenance of lifts and common parts in addition to the decent homes standard.

Mr. Sanders: I am grateful for the Minister's kind words at the start of his speech. I remember our time working together with much pleasure. Will he consider the fact that we require landlords to conduct a gas check when a tenancy begins? Why the reluctance to add a working fire alarm at the same time? They cannot do anything after that—it is then the tenant's responsibility—but the landlord could have that responsibility at the start of the tenancy.

Mr. Malik: That is a valid point worth considering. I will take it away, consider it and write to the hon. Gentleman. From a common-sense perspective, it seems like an appropriate opportunity to carry out a check for fire alarms if one is taking place for other potentially hazardous elements within the household.

The framework includes six standards for social housing providers, one of which is the home standard covering quality of accommodation and repairs and maintenance. The Tenant Services Authority's proposed quality standard means the decent homes standard or higher, and it is proposed that providers should give their tenants the opportunity to agree a local standard reflecting their concerns and priorities. If fire safety matters are a concern for tenants, the framework would enable tenants to shape their local standard to reflect that.

The hon. Gentleman has pressed for provision of smoke alarms to be made a statutory requirement on all landlords. As I have emphasised, the Government share his concern to ensure full take-up of smoke alarms in every dwelling. That is why we have focused so heavily on it in campaigns aimed at householders, tenants and landlords alike. I have already stated that the number of smoke alarms taken up has increased tenfold. There has been a step change in getting smoke alarms into dwellings; the latest campaign seeks to ensure another step change in terms of people checking them once a week. Our view is that checking is woefully inadequate at the moment, hence the campaign. Hopefully, it will have the same impact as previous campaigns.

I assure the House that we will continue to encourage social landlords to provide smoke alarms—particularly hard-wired systems, for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman highlighted—when carrying out other works to their stock. We think that, rather than introducing another regulatory requirement, remains the right way forward, notwithstanding the point that I made earlier. As I indicated, we will keep the matter under review, not least as we maintain the decent homes standard in future.

It is still worth noting that householders can take some responsibility for their own safety, including fire safety, and the vast majority do. For as little as £8, anyone can buy and install a smoke alarm for their home to help protect themselves and their family from the dangers of fire. Anyone unable to do so themselves can contact their local fire and rescue service and ask it to undertake a home fire risk check. Depending on the person's circumstances, the fire and rescue service will consider supplying and fitting a smoke alarm free of charge.

We remain committed to reducing deaths from fire so that tragedies such as the ones that we heard about today will not be repeated. All the hon. Gentleman's requests and suggestions are undoubtedly sensible and reasonable, but he will understand that introducing new requirements in legislation sometimes has unintended consequences. If we can do things without going down a legislative route, that would be the preferred option. As he highlighted in his intervention, we have opportunities to increase fire safety in the home without being too onerous or complex about it, and I will consider some of them. I thank him again for raising an issue that is incredibly important not just to his constituents but to people throughout the country.

Question put and agreed to.

1.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 16 December 2009

[FRANK COOK *in the Chair*]

Child Support Agency

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr. Watts.)*

9.30 am

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate on the Child Support Agency. Let me start with a bit of history. As everyone knows, the CSA was established in 1993 under the Child Support Act 1991. I was not a Member of Parliament when the Act was passed—that was just before I became an MP—but I have talked to those who were here and took part in the examination of the Bill in Committee. The problem at that time, which remains a problem to this day, was that there was not the investigation and scrutiny that there should have been of the mechanics of the Act that was put on the statute book. There has not been sufficient scrutiny in this place of what was proposed or of all the alterations that have taken place over the years.

There is constant talk of simplifying the child support system. The Government have made more and more new proposals over the years, but that does not seem to have been reflected at the sharp end, where I work as a constituency MP. Every week, I have at least two new cases where there are major problems. As I make my speech, I will demonstrate through at least six examples that some of my constituents face a major problem.

Surprisingly, when it was explained to those constituents that I was taking part in this debate and that, if they wanted, I would use their names, they were more than happy for that to happen. I am surprised that that is the case, given that most people would want to hide away from the publicity that such a debate engenders. Yet the constituents concerned were adamant and insisted that I use their cases to demonstrate what is wrong with the system. Many of those cases are known to the Department, because I have written directly to the Secretary of State and had replies from the Minister who is here today.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. Christmas is a time when all families should be together and fathers and mothers should have access to children. However, the CSA is getting in the way of that. Although he talks about the action that the Government rightly have taken to try to simplify the Act, does he agree that that has led to inconsistencies, because different fathers, different people and absent parents are treated differently, particularly in relation to the financial calculations? That issue is leading to major difficulties and should be resolved.

Mr. Donohoe: I think I will show that in the six cases that I am about to put to the Minister in order to get some answers. There is absolutely no doubt that we live within a complicated state of affairs in the modern world. I had one case that hon. Members would not believe, where I could not understand why the calculations were coming out the way they were. A woman was getting an incredible amount of money and I found out that the reason for that was that she had five children to five different fathers. As a consequence, the calculations were done in that way, which bamboozled me. I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said in that sense.

I shall now turn to my constituents' cases, and the first is that of Marian Morris from Prestwick. Marian has been coming to see me since January this year. She has been pursuing the CSA against her ex-husband and, to this date, is owed more than £44,000 by him. The man concerned is a charlatan. He has managed to disappear—to go offshore—and has run rings round all the agency's staff. Later, I will come to some of the elements that concern me about how the agency does things.

Marian's ex-husband deserted her and her two daughters back in November 1999, which is more than 10 years ago. The lady immediately put in a claim to the CSA, but to this day she has not received a single penny, either in child support payments or through any other support. Her ex-husband left suddenly, wiped out all the joint accounts and assets, and left her without a penny, yet he has not repaid a single thing to her.

During the past 10 years, Marian has worked and still does so. She has had three jobs in order to support and raise her daughters without assistance, and she feels extremely bitter that her daughters, now aged 16 and 14, have had to grow up so quickly and fend for themselves while she worked long hours—often 15 hours a day—because she had little money to pay for quality child care and has no family nearby to help.

As I say, Marian is owed more than £44,000 to date and the man concerned has run rings round the relevant agencies. I had a meeting with agency staff on Friday. The agency sent three officers down to see Marian and all they could do was constantly apologise for the current system. She has had a one-off consolatory payment of £150 from the agency itself in respect of ongoing delays, but I find such gestures derisory—in fact, it could be argued that they are a slap in the face to the individual.

Marian's case keeps dragging on and no one seems to be able to do anything about it, so she keeps writing to me, and staff in my office have to be constantly on the phone to the CSA—I will come back to the problems associated with that.

More than anything else, the problem has been summed up in an e-mail sent to me by Marian, in which she writes:

> "Once again, I feel that my case is being bounced from one incompetent team to another. I have yet to be assigned a case officer who sees any action through from start to finish."

That is the nub of the problems I am seeing and those are the difficulties we face as far as Marian is concerned.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I also commend the hon. Gentleman on introducing the debate. I am listening with great interest to the case studies he is describing. Part of the nub of the problem in Northern Ireland—I do not know whether it is the same in Scotland—is that staff retention is low and turnover of staff in the CSA is inordinately high. That

[Mr. Gregory Campbell]

means that time is not given for good-quality training of staff to ensure that the problems he is outlining are dealt with at the coal face.

Mr. Donohoe: I am gratefui to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will cover that point, because something that was working some time ago was the geographical distinction. For example, staff in the agency in Falkirk had various parts of Scotland to deal with. As a result, not only the Member of Parliament, but the individual, had five or six members of staff dealing with, for example, Ayrshire. That meant there was a good chance that they knew what was going on in Ayrshire, whereas now staff deal with all areas. The geographical distinction was one part of the old set-up that worked to the advantage of my constituents.

Bob Spink: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the problems is that the CSA is not listening to Members of Parliament who make representations? I made representations for a constituent who was being taken to court after allegedly not paying for two years. That father was eventually taken to court, even though I asked for a stay of those proceedings because I had the evidence that he had been paying.

After the court proceedings and judgment, the CSA accepted that a mistake meant that his payments were put down as being made by someone with the same name. The agency had also used the new man's national insurance number by mistake, and it now accepts that it was totally in error. The CSA failed to listen to common sense from the MP, proceeded with the court case and is still proceeding against the man concerned. Hon. Members can imagine what that has done to his relationship with his ex-wife and children—destroyed it. That is just not on.

Mr. Donohoe: I agree, and that is another example of the aspects of the CSA that, even after all the organisational and structural change, require a much closer look. The hon. Gentleman's intervention gives me the opportunity to say more on that: clearly, were the same officers to deal with the same cases right through the procedures, at least there would be an opportunity to introduce an ounce of common sense to the scheme. That is what is wrong with it, and I do not think it will ever recover to the position that once existed, even though in the olden days there were court cases as a result, which was not a great idea either. I accept what he says and trust that the Minister will take it on board.

The second case I would like to mention is that of Euan Loutit, a police officer who was married to another police officer. He thought that he was to be taken from the old scheme to the new, with all that entails, but it transpired that the confusion involved did not allow that change to take place. He came to see me many years ago about the problem he faced and indicated that he had major concerns about the parent with care. The CSA has investigated his case over the intervening period and concluded that everything is in order, but Euan has indicated to me that he does not believe that the CSA, as it could and should have done, investigated his wife's income. She had an accident while a police officer and was awarded £250,000 in compensation, and she earns money from tenants in her house that is not taken into account. As far as Euan is concerned, nothing with the case seems right.

In August 2009, the CSA wrote to me, stating that it would like to offer an assurance that the officer concerned in Mr. Loutit's case had

"investigated the parent-with-care's, Louise White, current circumstances and she was correctly treated as having no assessable income for the £107.34 assessment, completed on 11 June 2009."

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): Perhaps I have not been listening hard enough, but is Mr. Loutit the parent with care or the non-resident parent?

Mr. Donohoe: Mr. Loutit is the non-resident parent. I raise that case because it demonstrates a universal problem. The CSA's letter went on to state that

"we cannot negotiate the regular maintenance payments as this figure has been calculated in accordance with legislation."

That ties the hands of the CSA and does not let it see a bit of common sense. It gives no flexibility at all. That is the difficulty as far as Mr. Loutit sees it. When there is such confusion in the system, the arrears build up, so Mr. Loutit has enormous arrears and, as a consequence, the CSA claims that it all must be paid back within two years. At the same time, there is a restriction on the amount of money that can be taken from an individual—I think it is 40 per cent. of take-home pay.

My final point about that case, which beggars belief, is that the CSA now claims:

"It is not possible for Mr Loutit's case to be transferred to the new rules legislative system, which is calculated using a straight percentage of a parent's take home pay. This is because we have no legislation in place at present to allow such a transfer."

We need legislation in place, and that is what I ask the Minister to consider.

In November 2008 our transition to the new Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission commenced. It is anticipated that a single statutory maintenance calculation will be introduced from 2011, with the transition of all existing cases to that new system taking approximately three years. All parents involved will be kept abreast of how those changes will affect their situation. That, in itself, is something I would like the Minister to address as soon as is practical.

The third case is that of Andrew and Jacqui Jess. Andrew's problem is that they have been to the CSA over the years, arguing on the basis of a system that they settled amicably between them, but Jacqui and the children now live in Australia. The CSA will not take that into account when making the calculation because, it claims, if they had gone through the court, or if the case had been through a court or a similar system in Australia, he would be fine and that would be taken into account, but because the children are in Australia and he settled things of his own volition, the CSA says, "Sorry, we are not taking that into account at all."

Another problem that that case highlighted, and which was also mentioned at a meeting just last Friday with the CSA officers who came to my office, is that the CSA will not take the clear evidence individuals provide of their communication with the CSA. A parent might have telephone records showing clearly that there were conversations, and the CSA tells everyone who phones

that their calls are likely to be monitored, so why is there no track and why are no records kept? There must be records that are kept, and they are just not telling the truth to my constituents; that must be looked at much more closely.

The other element of that case concerns the office of the independent case examiner, who is looking at the situation of Andrew and Jacqui Jess. The examiner apparently arbitrates, but the CSA can still revisit the situation later and overrule the examiner's decision. There needs to be more consistency in the whole system.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): For the purposes of clarification, is the hon. Gentleman saying that in that case the CSA overruled an agreed court order?

Mr. Donohoe: No, the independent case examiner obviously will not be overruled on the conditions that are put to them, but it is possible that after the event situations will change so that we are back to square one. I have had such cases, and that is a problem. One would think that, once the independent case examiner had made what they thought was a ruling, that would stay for ever more; but the case can be revisited and altered, which does not seem particularly fair.

The fourth case is that of Tom Tait, who has worked diligently all his life. His company went into administration, and during the course of his employment his wages were arrested. He was paying and has proof of the fact—the wage slips are there for all to see. Money was taken from him, the company went into administration and the CSA told him that the employer had never written a cheque to it. He is being held responsible and has to pay the arrears, so we are told.

There is something absolutely, ridiculously wrong with the system if that is the case. The man is paying for one of his sons, who is 19 years old. He has shown his pay slips to the CSA. The son is an apprentice in a local factory, yet because he serves some of his apprenticeship in full-time education, the father has been told that he still has to pay for him. That individual's case must be looked at much more closely. He feels aggrieved about his position, as he has every entitlement to do.

We move to the fifth case, that of Paul McKendrick. He is not in the highest-paid job. He has been paying £30 a week, but arrears have accumulated, which means that the calculation has been worked out at £33. However, he cannot afford to pay any more, so his arrears are running up and nobody seems to want to do anything. He has all kinds of pay slips to show what his salary is, but nobody is taking into account his real circumstances. He states:

"They constantly come back to us saying there is nothing more they can do because they ARE applying the rules set by the Government!"

The CSA is blaming the Government as an escape route. That means that when I am sitting with Mr. McKendrick, he is blaming me. If the Government cannot look at these cases as they should, set better parameters and apply a bit of common sense, the position will continue to be difficult.

The final case I have this morning is that of Steven Mallinson, who is also a policeman. The latest letter that I received from him is dated 11 November and is worth reading to give a flavour of his problem:

"To get straight to the point, yes I still remain unhappy and I would like you to continue with your efforts to contact somebody within the CSA who is in a position to do something about my problem. I believe this may be Janis Crook, Client Services Director? Failing that I believe there is still an option to involve an independent party to look at my case.

Unfortunately the people I have dealt with so far seem content to hide behind unfathomable formulae and appear to be using 'new' legislation to justify incompetency in instances when 'old' legislation applies. My main example of this would be that my travel to work costs were not considered when a re-assessment was carried out in February using the old legislation however when I queried this I was palmed off and told that under the new legislation (which my case is now on) travelling to work costs are not considered. This is unacceptable.

Once again I find I am repeating myself and nobody appears to be listening. The main issue is the re-assessment carried out in February using the old legislation. There does not seem to be alarm bells ringing anywhere that up until this date I was paying £52 per month on the old legislation and from June 2009 it was calculated I should pay £150 per month on the new legislation, yet in a short space in between, in February 2009 it has been calculated that I should have been paying £650 per month (effective from April 2009, so in reality only for two months) and the knock on effect this calculation has had is that I am now paying £500 per month in a "phasing period" for the next year at least. There needs to be some common sense applied here and I need somebody who is in a position to apply common sense, and not hide behind an obviously flawed calculation system, to look at my case.

Again I raise the point that this phasing period exists so as there is not a financial impact on the resident parent when changing from the old legislation to the new legislation. Again I highlight that I was paying £52 per month from May 2005 until March 2009. I paid £105 per month from April 2009 until June 2009. I paid £152 at the start of July 2009. Again I raise the question, how could"

let us call her Miss X—

"possibly experience any financial impact given the trend of the aforementioned amounts that would result in her requiring £500 per month? There was no negative financial impact on her. There has, however, been a huge financial impact on myself going from the stated monthly sums to the now ridiculous £500 per month. When I raise this point nobody at the CSA seems to be able to apply common sense and realise how valid a point I have here and instead reply as they always do by spouting confusing figures and formulae in the hope I will just disappear and accept this nonsense. I am not an idiot and I will not accept this. If you contact the CSA they will confirm the above stated reason for the 'phasing period' and they will also confirm the payments I have made up until July 2009. I would ask that you do that and I would ask that you question how they can justify taking £500 per month from me.

The agency is named the CHILD support agency."

Again, let us call her Miss X,

"is now splashing out on pedigree pets, luxury holidays and full Sky television packages. I can no longer afford to take my children to the cinema or the zoo or ten pin bowling without having to rely on hand outs from my parents. How is that in the best interest of either of my children?"

Mr. Mallinson then asks how he is supposed to support his children in such circumstances. That is a typical letter from a parent who is at their wits' end.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): The hon. Gentleman has raised many important issues, but he has used the phrase "common sense" several times. Is this not a bit difficult for the CSA, which is given legislation that we pass and has to implement it? Surely, if it were to say, "We just don't think that feels right. We'll come up with a different number", would it not be vulnerable to challenge from the other party, who would say, "No, that is the law. You should have applied it"? Is it not

[Steve Webb]

rather hard on the CSA to say that it is not using common sense when it is actually applying the laws that we have given it to apply?

Mr. Donohoe: The hon. Gentleman has hit the nail on the head, because that is the problem. When courts were dealing with these matters, the judge sat there and did the act of Solomon, and both parties had to accept what he or she said. The position now is that there have been many changes to the legislation, people are very confused and cases are very complicated. That is why we are getting what we are getting, and why I say that perhaps common sense should apply. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for intervening.

In summary, in the first case I mentioned, everything had been involved: all the agencies, bailiffs, everybody from outside. Can the Minister tell me what the cost of all that was? Perhaps she cannot today, but I would like to know what the cost is of bailiffs coming into cases when it is clear they are not getting any satisfaction. They run around all the time, probably getting a fair amount in fees, but they are not delivering any of the outstanding money.

I would also like to know in a general sense why the compensation is so derisory. I heard this morning that farmers are looking for compensation, and they are talking about literally tens of thousands of pounds, but in this case, a Government agency is making fundamental mistakes and delaying matters, and people are whacking up enormous arrears. At the same time, compensation of sometimes £75, sometimes £150, is given. If there is to be what I would consider satisfactory compensation, the Government will have to revisit the matter.

Apparently, no legislation is in place at present to allow transfer from one scheme to the other, and the Government should address that. I am told that the reason for the three-year changeover date is a problem in the Department, which operates three different computer systems that cannot be married together. Is that so? Is that why we are talking about a three-year delay? In that circumstance, somebody surely needs to revisit the issue far more quickly.

There is a broader, cross-government issue that has always been of concern to me: the apparent lack of joined-up thinking between all the agencies and Departments involved. It only takes a micro-second to find out whether somebody has a driving licence or a national insurance number, or what the Treasury is taking from them in tax, but none of that happens. That is an outstanding issue as far as self-employed people are concerned, because although those on pay-as-you-earn are caught easily, those who are self-employed and have a smart accountant can, and often do, run rings round the agency. I have seen that at first hand on at least a couple of occasions in my constituency case load.

If someone's wages or salary is arrested, who is responsible for making that happen? In certain cases, that course of action has not been continued. I cannot understand that.

There is always talk in the agency about targets, which it speaks of in glowing terms. There is talk about how it is now bang on target regarding the income from the parents. But there are two sides to a target. People could be overpaying and the calculation may be wrong. If I were in an agency that had an upper-level target, I would not be examining that position too closely. Has that been taken into account inside the agency as a matter of course? If it just shies away from examining a case where an individual is challenging the amount, because doing so means it will not meet its target for the month, there is a problem.

My next point has already been made in an intervention, but it is worth while reinforcing it. It would be useful for hon. Members to deal with the same staff when phoning the MP hotline, and it would be useful if our constituents dealt with the same staff when they phoned. At least that happened under the old system, but no longer, as I found out in my office when talking to both my members of staff, Ruth Brown and Samantha Mair. They told me they are not getting the same service now that they were getting six or nine months ago.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Staff turnover and not being able to contact the same person are common complaints. Part of the problem is morale and staff turnover in the agency. When I had some ministerial responsibility in Northern Ireland, in the Department for Social Development a number of years ago, that was an issue even then, but it still appears to be a problem. Has the hon. Gentleman any suggestions about how that could be addressed?

Mr. Donohoe: I have to say something as an ex-trade union official: I emphasise "ex", because it is more than 20 years ago. I was responsible for housing officers in local government, who were under such enormous pressures that they had to put up screens between themselves and the public. A parallel could be drawn with how those working at the sharp end in the CSA must feel, going into work and being hammered every minute of the day by people who are irate because they think things are wrong. That is why we are in the situation we are in today.

I should like the Minister to tell me, although perhaps not today, what the staff turnover is in the CSA. There were 8,700 members of staff as of September, but I saw a worrying figure showing that as many as 600 members of staff have been transferred out of the CSA, which must put more pressure on the agency. Why has that been allowed to happen? There are pressures in Jobcentre Plus, but why have so many staff been taken out of the CSA, when it is dealing with people's lives? That point is worth making. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds) for his intervention.

I worry about the driving disqualification element—taking away the driving licence—putting people in jail and taking away their passports. On more than 900 occasions in 2007-08, the CSA applied at hearings for the most serious sanctions at its disposal: imprisonment or driving disqualification. On 695 occasions—a fifth of all such hearings that year—the defendants did not even bother to turn up, at a significant cost to the taxpayer. In such circumstances, the agency surely must endure further delay and the expense of taking out an arrest warrant to bring the defendant forcibly before the court. Is that not a waste of public money? At the end of all this, there is unnecessary further delay, and the parent caring for the child is still without his or her maintenance.

All those issues are of major concern to me and have become more so over the past few months. That is the main reason why I asked for this debate. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

10.7 am

Mr. Angus MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr. Donohoe) on securing the debate and I thank him.

I should briefly like to outline for the Minister an issue involving a constituent of mine who has been shown to be infertile, but is still being chased by the CSA even though it has now dropped the main case against him. I cannot name the man because in the community I am from, which he is also from, he is probably known by about 80 to 90 per cent. of the people. Also, the grown-up child and the grandmother in question do not know about the non-paternity. Mentioning his name would effectively shatter lives.

I have been in correspondence with the Minister on the main point, and the outline is as follows. In 2001 the Child Support Agency started requesting maintenance from my constituent. In early 2002 he denied paternity, but because he had signed the birth certificate the CSA decided that he was the father. Despite his denying his paternity the CSA started to charge him some £73 a week as well as a penalty. In 2006 his maintenance charges were adjusted and levelled out to about £127.60 a week. He did not pay maintenance to the CSA and it then placed a bill of inhibition on him and attempted to freeze his bank accounts. Over the period 2006-09, maintenance charges were at about £27,000 and the CSA attempted to have him incarcerated. However, he produced a doctor's letter in court stating that he was infertile. Two leading figures in the British Medical Association in Scotland have been supporting and helping him, and the letter they produced put the arrest warrant on hold.

In February, the mother of the child was asked to produce DNA samples from herself and the child to prove paternity. She refused. My constituent then began a process of declaration of non-parentage in court. In August, the mother declared that she did not want payment of arrears, and the CSA dropped the case, but it is still pursuing my constituent for £2,400 in fees. The bill of inhibition still stands against him, so he cannot sell any property to pay off the debt. I met him in October, having met him many times previously. His house was under threat of repossession, and in November he was denied legal aid for declaration of non-parentage. The process has been long and difficult for him, and I shall give an idea of how long it has been. The former Prime Minister was in power, the Afghan war had not started, and Saddam Hussein was in charge of Iraq. That is a long period in someone's life, and a number of questions arise.

Why did the CSA not go after the mother who made the claim against my constituent? Why is he being made to repay some funds? Where is the apology after 10 years of persecution? Where is the compensation from the CSA? His house was nearly foreclosed, his social life was destroyed because it is difficult in his community to lead a normal life with the stigma hanging over his head, and his career has been severely hampered. The CSA has effectively walked away from the case, but not without trying to charge him £2,400. Why is it charging him when it was found that he could not possibly have been the father? The fundamental point is that he is infertile, and has been declared so by eminent doctors, but his life has been turned upside down by the CSA. I have seen him in harrowing circumstances.

I have been in correspondence with the Minister, her predecessors, and a number of people at the CSA. I plead with her to get the case sorted as best she can, so that someone who has lost a decade of his life because of the difficulties in the CSA can get it back on track.

10.11 am

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr. Donohoe) on raising this important and under-debated issue. All of us, including Ministers, have constituents at our surgeries complaining about the Child Support Agency, and several attempts have been made to reform it. The Liberal Democrats have often been critical of those attempts, and one of our concerns has been the very point that the hon. Gentleman made. In my view, the ideal system would have a simple baseline assessment with a safety valve for hard cases. That seems to be the right combination, however it is administered and enforced.

I am a father, and I think one tends to underestimate the cost of bringing up a child, so it is important to have a benchmark figure on which to base the system. In many cases, that will be more or less fair, but there will always be individual circumstances in which common sense shows that the formula does not do justice to the story, so there needs to be an exceptional safety valve to provide a fairer assessment in a small number of cases. The hon. Gentleman talked about the wisdom of Solomon, and that is sometimes needed. We need a mechanism by which the bulk of cases are assessed or do not go through the CSA, based on a fairly simple set of guideline figures, but a safety valve is needed for exceptional circumstances. That would deal with many of the issues that have been raised this morning.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for describing the six cases, which highlight a number of issues common to many of us, and I have some sympathy with some of his points. He mentioned the woeful inadequacy of consolatory payments, and the CSA's line will be that they are not replacement for maintenance that should have been provided, but a few pounds to say sorry. That is not much consolation when hundreds or thousands of pounds are involved, and we should consider more carefully whether, in extremis, the agency should replace the maintenance that should have been paid if it was at fault and the person who lost out has done everything possible. If the agency has clearly failed, there must be a case for its having a duty to replace the maintenance that should have been collected. That should not be the norm, because it would be an extreme position, but sending someone £50 and saying sorry several years later is not good enough. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about that.

I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments about the independent case examiner. The history is that the CSA was so awful that cases were swamping the parliamentary ombudsman, so we had to have an ombudsman just for the CSA. I value and respect the work of the independent case examiner, but I was

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slightly disappointed about a recent case in which the case examiner found in favour of my constituent, and the CSA ignored that. The only answer was to go to the ombudsman, which was complete nonsense. Will the Minister clarify whether the independent case examiner is advisory or has teeth? Constituents are frustrated when they go to what seems to be an independent third party, but months go by, evidence is collected, it finds in their favour, and the CSA then fails to act on the recommendations, so the case goes to an ombudsman and the process may take another year. That is in no one's interest, and I hope the Minister will clarify the status of the independent case examiner's conclusions.

I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments about, for example, members of the public phoning the CSA and reaching a different person every time. There is bound to be an element of that, because people work part time and so on, so the same person will not always be available, but the principle of people having a case load would provide some continuity, and that is important. A constituent who came to see me recently had phoned the CSA time and again over a year and had spoken to a different person every time. People kept promising to phone him back, but did not do so, and when he phoned again someone else promised to phone back. I raised that with the CSA, and pointed out that there was a problem because there seemed not to be a trigger. Someone may say that a matter has been passed to another section and that when it responds that person will contact the member of the public, but there seems not to be a trigger if that section does not respond until the applicant chases it up.

The agency told me that there is a casework system and a trigger, but when the chief executive looked at the case to which I referred, he said it was a clerical case—one where things have gone wrong and are a mess. The answer was that clerical cases are just different. They may be different, but surely people whose cases are being dealt with clerically should expect the same standard of customer service as everyone else. It is not their fault if the data on a computer are wrong, for example. Basic customer service is not sufficiently in place.

When I asked for account breakdowns, the chief executive told me that they will take 20 weeks, and that that is the customer service standard. When I asked him whether that appalled him, he said, "If you want them done quicker, what do you want us not to do? If the figures are wanted quickly and the task is a difficult clerical one, people must stop doing something else. What do you want us to do—stop chasing maintenance?"

That raises the issue of resourcing the CSA, which the hon. Gentleman touched on. I appreciate that serious money goes into it and that staff have been transferred out to deal with the rise in unemployment, but I wonder whether an assessment has been made of the adequacy of the CSA's resourcing to do its job. If it takes nearly five months just to obtain a statement, something is not right. If that is the performance standard and all that it is expected to do, something has gone wrong.

A problem I sometimes come across is the money having gone to the CSA but not being allocated to the right person. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a case of money going to someone else with the same name. When one contacts the CSA, one sometimes detects a shrugging of shoulders and the attitude that it was just put in the wrong account, which is no big deal. However, it is a big deal for the families concerned. The attitude seems to be that the CSA is a big organisation with millions of payments coming and going, and the odd one will go astray, so get over it. That is not good enough. Just describing what has gone wrong and saying that it will be put right next month is not good enough.

Having said all that, I noticed that five of the six cases that the hon. Gentleman raised—this may be coincidence—involved non-resident parents. The first involved vast arrears of £44,000, and the others involved dads complaining about how their arrears and so on had been handled. There is a balance to be struck. When a family with a CSA case are sitting in front of me, I try to remember that the spouse or the children may also be constituents. What we want is fairness for the person who must pay the money, and proper money and support for the child and the family. Clearly, it would be wrong, unfair and distressing if the hon. Gentleman's constituent had his "deduction from earnings order" money snaffled by the company, and I cannot comment on how the arrears arose, but in general if someone has arrears, it may be because the CSA has messed up or because the money to be provided for their children has not been paid. We need a balance.

Mr. Donohoe: In my constituency, there have been occasions when I have had one parent sitting in front of me, and the other parent sitting outside waiting to come in. There might be an imbalance in the six cases that I have spoken about today, but both parties come to see me, normally at different times.

Steve Webb: I am sure that is right—the same thing has happened to me. My point is that whenever somebody has to pay arrears that seem unfair, it is important to bear in mind the fact that there is a child at the other end of the transaction. In the first case mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, arrears ran into tens of thousands of pounds. That is tens of thousands of pounds that were meant for the welfare of the child but did not get through.

Typically, that is apparent when one sees the mother, for example, but when a father is in front of me, occasionally I will say, "Where do these arrears come from? Why didn't you pay for the past 18 months?" Sometimes the answers that I receive are not as convincing as they might be. We need a system that is seen to be fair, transparent and responsive to the individual case, but we must always remember that the welfare of the child is central.

As I said in an intervention, we cannot condemn the CSA for implementing the laws that we have given it to implement. We must take responsibility and, as the hon. Gentleman intimated, CSA legislation was scrutinised appallingly when it was introduced—there was a feeling that something had to be done. Everybody was in favour of the legislation, and I always think that the worst laws passed in the House are those that everyone supports, as they do not get the scrutiny they deserve. Perhaps, together with our predecessors, we are all responsible in different ways for having allowed the situation to get to this point.

One of my concerns for the future regards those families who no longer go through the CSA. I have tabled some questions on that issue, and have received

some helpful letters from the CSA. The presumption now is that partners should try to make a deal, and in an ideal world that is how things would proceed. Someone once famously said that when it comes to family breakdown, the CSA has never been part of the healing process, and that is correct. Obviously, it is a good thing if a couple, albeit separated, can agree on a fair assessment for a child that can be implemented without acrimony or the need for enforcement. I welcome the fact that that is happening more.

My concern is about when there are two partners, one of whom is perhaps articulate and well-lawyered, as it were. An initial deal might be struck and, for the sake of argument, the mother might be offered a cash lump sum and a modest monthly maintenance assessment. On day one, it might seem like a lot of money—£5,000 or something—and beyond the dreams of avarice. A year later, the lump sum is gone, the monthly maintenance is not much and money is needed for a new pair of trainers, a school trip or whatever.

It might be too early to know whether such a thing is happening, but I worry that, at that point, the mother might be in a poor negotiating position. She might talk to her ex-husband or ex-partner and say, "I need more money", and he might reply, "I gave you £5,000. What have you done with that? I give you money every month; you get benefits. Go away. I have lawyers who say you can't have any more."

Clearly, that is not true, and such a woman could go to the CSA, ring the options helpline and so on. I hope she would do that. However, I want the Minister to ensure that we closely monitor what happens to people who in the past would have gone through the CSA process, but who have made a deal and fallen off the official radar because they do not need contact with the authorities.

I am pleased that the CSA has done some internal survey work, and that over the first quarter of next year it will do some formal surveying and look at the terms of the agreements of those people who have private arrangements. However, that work needs following up six or 12 months down the track to see what has happened to those who have gone off the radar. I worry that a small number of people will fall through the gap and not realise that they have the right to go back to the CSA, even if a private deal has been made.

I was interested in the comments made by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil). Returning to the point about common sense, we sometimes find that the CSA is slow to back down when things have gone wrong. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned a case that had to go to court. I am aware that the CSA regards measures on driving licences and passports as a last resort for somebody who has probably evaded payment and tried to avoid every means of paying, and sometimes extreme approaches are taken. If someone does not turn up in court, that is not necessarily the fault of the CSA, but it raises issues about joint working between different Government agencies.

In such cases, we need the Government and the CSA to be able to tap in more smoothly to Inland Revenue data, which I know happens to some extent, as well as benefits and other data, to ensure that when an allegation is made about someone's income or job, it can be verified.

My constituents say to me—I am sure this is the case for other hon. Members—that the CSA wants them to turn into private investigators. If someone says "My ex is working," the CSA says, "Prove it." How should they prove it? They are asked to go and stand outside the gates and take photographs and so on. When I told the CSA that my constituents feel that they have to don a dirty mac and turn into private investigators, its response was, "We don't have the powers or the resources to do it ourselves." That creates a tension.

We do not want malicious allegations, but where serious and well-founded allegations are made, we need a system whereby the CSA can investigate more vigorously, instead of putting so much onus of proof on the person who makes the claim. I understand that a balance is required, but sometimes people know a lot about what their ex-partner is doing—where they work or where they go to the pub. They also overhear conversations and so on, especially if they are still living in the same community.

Where a reasonably substantiated allegation is made about undisclosed earnings or something similar, perhaps the CSA errs too much towards saying, "Until you show us cast-iron, black and white, verifiable proof, we won't do anything." Given a well-founded allegation, I would like the CSA to be more proactive and say, "Yes, there is something in this. We will take it seriously and use our data sources to act on it." That would be a fairer system.

Let me repeat my appreciation for the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, who has given us the opportunity to debate this issue. As MPs, we always see the bad cases, and I suspect that there are many instances of people getting their maintenance assessed and paid on time. Such people think the system is fair and the children get the money. Those cases never come across our desks, and we should place on the record our appreciation of those who ensure that hundreds of thousands of children in this country receive child maintenance that they might not otherwise get.

Nevertheless, there is considerable room for improvement, especially in areas such as the derisory consolatory payments, the powers of the independent case examiner and continuity of staffing and contact with members of the public. I hope that the Minister will help the CSA to improve the service that it provides for the public.

10.27 am

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr. Donohoe) on securing this timely and important debate. As a Back Bencher, I did exactly what he has done, and brought seven or eight of my constituency cases to the attention of the Minister who was then responsible for the CSA. It is sad that an hon. Member still needs to do that after considerable efforts have been made by all parties to try to improve the CSA.

We all agree that a well-functioning child support system is vital. The Government will not meet their child poverty targets for 2010 or 2020 unless the CSA is effective and does its job well. The CSA can play a part in ensuring that there are fewer unwanted pregnancies if fathers know that the agency is effective and will come after them, and that they will have to pay for 18 years for the child that they brought into the world. There is

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also a little evidence to suggest that an effective CSA has some influence in reducing relationship breakdown, according to Professor Nick Wikeley. I was struck by a comment made by the journalist Polly Toynbee in *The Guardian* on 27 January this year. She said that

"the big story is the mass refusal of so many fathers to pay anything—ever."

Earlier in the article, she said that

"two-thirds of all absent fathers pay nothing at all."

That figure is a little too high, according to the latest information that I have seen. The 2007 families and children study produced by the Department for Work and Pensions showed in table 15.1 that 61 per cent. of all parents with care were not receiving child maintenance.

It is important when we consider the CSA that it tells us its performance on the number of cases for which there is a child maintenance liability, but as politicians we need to be aware of the situation throughout the country. That matters hugely, because if a clear majority of non-resident parents—about 60 per cent. or, for argument's sake, somewhere between 60 and 70 per cent.—are not paying child maintenance, the word on the street, or the culture, is that people can avoid paying it. That is deeply unhelpful to what all of us in the Chamber are trying to achieve.

I commend the attempts that we heard about yesterday to inculcate a greater sense of financial responsibility among non-resident parents, and sometimes even among parents with care. In a recent survey, 22 per cent. of parents with care were saying, rather surprisingly and counter-intuitively, that they did not really want child maintenance. Perhaps the relationships had broken up very badly. That figure surprised me, but it was from a piece of work undertaken by the Department.

Mr. Donohoe: I would like to get my mind clearer on that point, because I had understood that if the parents did not want the CSA involved and were not on benefits, there would be no need for the CSA's involvement at all.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is correct. Now that there are voluntary arrangements and we have repealed section 6 of the 1991 Act, people do not have to come within the CSA's net. I was trying to make a slightly broader point and saying that if we look across society as a whole—not just at the CSA cases and the voluntary arrangement cases, but at those cases in which neither applies—we see that there is unfortunately a clear majority of cases in which parents split up and no money is moving. That worries me and we need to bear it in mind. Polly Toynbee was right to draw attention to it earlier this year. Indeed, when Sir David Henshaw produced his excellent report in 2006, he said that in only 30 per cent. of cases was some maintenance paid. I think that the figure has improved slightly, but we need to be aware of the broader picture.

I want better co-operation between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs—the Inland Revenue, as we used to know it—and the CSA. I agree with the comment that many parents feel that they are forced to act as private detectives to establish the non-resident parent's income. Will the Minister tell us what further co-operation is in the pipeline between HMRC and the CSA? That was one of the best things that we put in the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008. It should have happened long ago, but I am not convinced that we are yet reaping the full benefit in data transfer and tracking all income available to non-resident parents to make the CSA as effective as it could be.

I shall refer briefly to the case of one of my constituents, who is also calling for greater co-operation between HMRC and the CSA. Her ex-partner signed on as unemployed. She says that when Mr. X signed on earlier this year,

"it should have been quite simple to take the measly £5 a week from his benefit but still all I have received since April is… £10 or £15… this system is quite simply failing children. My children go without because of this terrible situation".

She says that all she wants is

"justice for my children who have… holes in their… shoes… until I can afford to get some more!"

She goes on to say that she is convinced that her ex-partner is working, even though he is signing on. She has pretty good evidence of that and is extremely frustrated that that information does not seem to have been captured and taken forward.

This is just a practical point. I would like to know from the Minister why e-mail communication with the CSA is not now an option. That point was raised with me by Families Need Fathers, whose representatives I met on Monday. As they put it to me, e-mail communication would save considerable time, money and anger, not least when assessments are sent to old addresses, resulting sometimes in huge child maintenance liabilities arising without the non-resident parent's knowledge. May we please move into the 21st century and ensure that e-mail communication can happen between the agency and parents with care and non-resident parents? That would be practical and helpful.

We need strong and robust enforcement powers in the CSA. For many years during the previous Parliament, I used to question DWP Ministers about the number of driving licences that had been taken away. I think that, although the agency had the powers, only two licences had been taken away. However, the effect of threatening to take such action can be beneficial. I understand from the helpful House of Commons Library debate briefing pack that, in the state of Maine in the USA, $89 million was collected through threatening to remove driving licences and that, in Australia, an extra 11 million Australian dollars was raised through threatening to stop non-payers travelling abroad.

I do not want anyone's driving licence or passport to be taken away, but if the threat of that is effective when all other options have failed, those are tools that, sadly, the CSA needs in its armoury—there must be consequences. Child support matters. Children's lives and futures are at stake, and we will not meet our child poverty targets unless we have a CSA that works.

The system needs to be fair, however. Fairness to non-resident parents—fairness to, in the main, fathers—is critical to a well functioning CSA that has broad public support. A couple of practical issues worry me in that regard. One is the fact that liability orders are not stayed if the application is appealed. We need a quick and fair appeal system so that cases are not held up indefinitely, but it seems to go against natural justice that the liability order keeps on going if there is an appeal. That should be looked into quickly and fairly, and an adjudication made fast.

It also seems odd that non-resident parents should have to pay the costs of challenging the use of administrative powers even if they have been wrongly used. There was provision in the 2008 Act; I remember debating that point when it went through the House. I have a great deal of sympathy for the case raised by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil), in respect of the £2,400 that his constituent has been asked for when he never could have been a father. It is worrying that in such cases the mother has the right to refuse a DNA test. What if his constituent had not been proved to be infertile? Would those liability assessments have gone on piling up if the mother could refuse a DNA test? We have the technology to decide these things decisively now. That issue worries me as well and possibly needs to be examined.

I am concerned about the 25 per cent. variation of income figure that was mentioned when we were putting the 2008 Act on the statute book. Will the Minister confirm whether the Department still has that figure in mind?

I think that cases will soon be hitting the press of people who have lost their jobs and who are now on benefit, but whose maintenance liability has not been reduced, because the fall in their income was just below the CSA's 25 per cent. variation figure. I appreciate that the CSA went for such a high figure because it was so scarred by the amount of work caused by very minor variations. However, as it gains in confidence and its systems become more robust, the 25 per cent. figure will need to change. If someone's income drops by 24 per cent., should they really go on paying maintenance at the level at which they were first assessed? That seems to go against natural justice.

I want briefly to mention the one-year rule, which I thought the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire would bring up. It is a concern that parties who have happily and voluntarily gone to court to produce flexible arrangements that suit them to deal with their assets and income, can see those arrangements unwound within a year, to the detriment of either the parent with care or the non-resident parent. All parties raised that issue when the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill went through the House, and it is a bit of unfinished business, so I leave it on the Minister's radar screen.

Child maintenance arrears, or the debt as they are commonly known, have recently come down slightly, which is excellent—let us give credit where it is due. They are now just under £3.8 billion, although that is a slightly fictitious figure because a lot of the assessments were not really accurate. Furthermore, about half that sum is owed to the Secretary of State, rather than to parents with care. However, it matters that we collect those arrears.

It also matters that we collect arrears where the children are over 18, and I am a bit concerned that the focus seems to have been on collecting debt only where the children are under 18. If someone has been deprived throughout their childhood, the fact that they can get a lump sum when they are 19 or 20—perhaps to help them to go through college or university or to get a small deposit on a house—is important, and we must not forget that.

I recently visited a CSA office and talked to some of the staff, who work extremely hard in difficult circumstances, as was said earlier. I heard of the joy that someone who has got nothing for years feels when a cheque for £15,000 or £20,000 comes through. The difference that that can make to a young person's life is phenomenal. These things matter. Ideally, we want the income to be there as people go through their childhood, but if they have not had that income, we must not give up on the collectable debt. If the non-resident parent has assets, I would support the CSA in going after those assets.

On the debt, I am worried that up-to-date information has not been published. Gingerbread has pressed for the publication of client fund accounts throughout October, November and December. It worries me that there is no official published deadline. Many Government figures come out at set times of the year; indeed, the unemployment figures came out at 9.30 this morning. The DWP cannot say, "Sorry, we don't feel like doing them this month. We'll do them next month." That is simply not good enough. We need the figures to come out regularly, because lobby groups such as Gingerbread study them carefully. Maintenance arrears matter, and we must make sure that we do not lose sight of them.

As the CSA grows in confidence, I hope that it will take a leaf out of the Australian CSA's book by trying to ensure that the relationship between separated parents is as good as it can be. I say that because there is evidence that if the relationship is better, rather than worse, more money is likely to flow. I understand why the CSA has been wary of going down that route, but I hope that it will look at the issue as it gains in confidence. I have with me two booklets from the Australian CSA called "Me and my Kids—Parenting from a distance" and "Me, my Kids and my Ex—Forming a workable relationship for the benefit of your children". The Australian CSA produces those because it recognises that if we can make relationships better, make contact amicable and help with parenting from a distance, more money is likely to flow. That is also better for children. I therefore commend that approach.

Finally, I share the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire. It will be five years before we get the gross-income scheme. We passed the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act in 2008, and it will be five years—2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013—before we get to 2014 and one gross-income scheme. We all back the scheme, because it is simpler and easier. It will also net the self-employed and take in rental and dividend income. It is scandalous that the original legislation did not include such income—I do not know what MPs were doing when we passed it. That was wrong, because all income should be included. Why have these changes taken so long? Five years seems a very long time. We have seen the differences between the old scheme, the new scheme and the future scheme, so let us move ahead as quickly as we can.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Helen Goodman): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Cook? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr. Donohoe) on securing this important debate. Over the years, he has done a lot of work on these matters for his constituents and he is completely committed to seeing a better system introduced. Yesterday, a lot of hon. Members went to an event run by the

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Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission in the House and they saw the huge amount of work that is going on to improve the situation.

One of the key issues that has been raised this morning is enforcement powers. Judging the rights and wrongs as between the parent with care and the non-resident parent will always be a difficult balancing act. Over the past 10 years, however, we have discovered that the balance was previously in the wrong place. The points that the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has just made about there being a significantly problematic culture are absolutely right. It is a problem if, as is currently the case, only 45 per cent. of non-resident parents pay their maintenance in full.

In the measures that we have recently introduced, we have therefore strengthened enforcement powers. In October 2008, it became an offence for the non-resident parent to withhold information pertaining to a change of address. In August this year, CMEC assumed the power to deduct payments from non-resident parents' bank accounts without recourse to the courts. It also has the power to ask the court to impose a curfew on a non-resident parent. Under the Welfare Reform Act 2009, which secured Royal Assent last month, the commission now also has the power to remove the passports and driving licences of parents who have wilfully or culpably failed to meet their child maintenance obligations. Those powers are controversial, but it is important that we have them, given the context in which we operate.

Hon. Members are clearly still getting a large number of extremely complex cases in their constituency mailbags, and those cases have not been handled properly or as well as any of us would wish. Leaving aside those complex cases, however, the number of complaints against the CSA has fallen by more than half since 2004-05, which is an indication of its improved performance, as are the other performance statistics. The number of children benefiting from the CSA's work has increased by 250,000 over the past five years. The number of cases in receipt of maintenance has gone up from 400,000 to 600,000.

Hon. Members have talked a lot about the quality of the administration, where there have also been significant improvements. In 2004, only 27 per cent. of cases were dealt with within 12 weeks, but that number has gone up to 84 per cent. In 2005, the average time it took to answer the telephone was one minute 40 seconds, but it is now down to eight seconds. I fully understand hon. Members' concerns about their constituents telephoning the CSA and getting different people answering. In essence, the reason is that we have extended the CSA's opening hours so that it can be more available to people. The problem is that of course people cannot work the entire 60 hours a week during which the agency is open.

Mr. Donohoe: Will the Minister address the issue that I raised of the apparent reduction in staffing? I believe that 600 people have been transferred out of the CSA into Jobcentre Plus.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is right about that. However, there are two things I want to say—and I do not want to wipe away the frustration of his constituents when they do not get the service to which they are entitled. First, the level of resources going into CMEC and the CSA must take account of the state of the public finances. We must look for efficiencies just as we are doing throughout the public services. Secondly, the reductions have been achieved while increasing the efficiency of the organisation. It is not as if we have been taking resources from the organisation and finding that service provision has collapsed.

One of the main points raised by my hon. Friend was the question of why people cannot move from the old scheme to the current scheme. There is a fundamental reason why we do not do that. We do it only after a significant change of circumstances, by which I do not mean someone's income going up or down, but rather a new child in the family or one or other of the parties making a new partnership. We cannot allow people to choose the scheme they want to enter, because for every parent who would choose to move there would be one in an equal and opposite position of not wanting to move. Giving people that choice would intensify the degree of conflict. I accept that that means people being treated differently, but in running a system we must consider the level of justice being achieved overall.

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire asked why it was taking so long to introduce the future scheme. We have the legislation and we must embed the new computer systems. We are doing that on a different basis from previously and are learning from the bad experiences we had. Now we are using off-the-shelf computer systems rather than building our own, which should make them more economical and flexible. We intend new cases to go on to the future scheme from 2011 and everyone to be transferred to it in 2014.

Mr. Donohoe: Will the Minister confirm that under the new system it will be possible to have cross-fertilisation of thinking between the agency, the Treasury and all the driving agencies? If that is the case, many of the complications that I have encountered would be overturned.

Helen Goodman: Among the main benefits of the future scheme will be the fact that it will get data from HMRC and that we shall move from a formula using net income to one using gross income. That system has been used in other countries with significant success.

I am sorry that I shall not be able to comment on every case that hon. Members have raised this morning, because there is not time to do so in detail, and I do not have all the information. However, hon. Members can, if they have not already done so, write to me about cases, which I can look into. I shall comment on a couple of cases of particular concern, starting with the company going into liquidation and the man who was asked to pay twice. The non-resident parent remains liable to pay child maintenance, but he should be able to claim the payments that have been deducted from the liquidator. If he is unsuccessful, the CSA will discuss with him how to handle the arrears.

Mr. Donohoe: Surely it should not be his responsibility. Given that he has done all he should, the agency should pursue the liquidator for the money. He has already paid it.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend makes his point with characteristic force and I shall take that thought away with me.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil) raised another case of some concern, about a non-resident parent whose name was on the birth certificate, but who could not possibly have been the father. Once the non-resident parent has provided proof of his infertility or a DNA test has shown that he is not the father, the CSA can revise its original decision, extinguishing all liability for child maintenance, and any payments may be refunded.

Mr. MacNeil: Would that include the fees of £2,400 that the agency is asking my constituent for? That is the point that is causing him quite some concern at the moment.

Helen Goodman: The honest answer, I am afraid, is that I do not know, and I shall have to get back to the hon. Gentleman on that point.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) gave a characteristically well- informed speech and set out a general schema in which we would deal in a fairly automatic way with straightforward cases, but pay greater attention to the hard cases. Generally, that is a good way of administering the scheme, and that is what we are attempting to do. I guess that the difficulty is in discussing which cases are hard.

The hon. Gentleman also made a valid point about people moving off the system altogether and whether people will get everything to which they are entitled from the options service. Gingerbread, for example, is particularly concerned about the re-establishment of what I shall call traditional gender relations, in which for the sake of peace women might not push as hard as they ought. I agree that that is an issue, and I am on top of it. We are considering how we can monitor that effectively.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire made a good point about the overall culture in which we operate and the difficulties that we face. I hope that hon. Members feel that we are making significant improvements to the child support system overall. We are succeeding at the moment in lifting 100,000 children out of child poverty because of the way in which the system currently runs.

GP Practice Boundaries

11 am

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to see you in the Chair, Mr. Cook, presiding over a debate on a subject that is highly important to all our constituents. It is good that the Minister responding to the debate is my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), who is my constituency neighbour to the south-west.

If we look at the Government's policy on the NHS since 1997, we can see that a welter of statistics confirm the excellent and vital progress that has been made in many areas. For example, we have over 44,000 more doctors and almost 90,000 more nurses, and 3 million more operations are carried out each year than in 1997, with the number of heart operations more than doubling. Net public spending on the NHS has nearly tripled since 1997. Then it was £35 billion; it is now more than £90 billion. Waiting times are at the lowest level in NHS history.

The risk, however, is that the effectiveness and durability of those fantastic achievements may be undermined by an obsession with organisational and administrative reform of the NHS. In the view of many NHS workers, of patients and indeed of Members of Parliament and community representatives, the commercial mantra of choice is being used as a cloak for the marketisation and privatisation of the NHS.

At the Brighton Labour party conference in September, the Secretary of State for Health said:

"I cannot see why families shouldn't register with the GP practice that suits them best. So, I've said we'll abolish GP practice boundaries within a year."

That did not exactly come out of the blue, but it caused a great deal of concern among GPs in my constituency and elsewhere. Even those GPs who saw some benefits from that rather rushed reform, such as Dr. Theresa Eynon of the Hugglescote surgery, were quick to express to me their fear that abolishing GP practice boundaries could worsen the plight of those patients most vulnerable to serious long-term health problems.

The Government's plans provide further proof that the inverse care law is alive and well. As the Minister will know, the idea was first proposed by Julian Tudor Hart in 1971. His law states that the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely to the need for it in the population that it serves. Put simply, those who need health care services the least use them more, and more effectively, than those with the most need.

That is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with allowing people to register with a GP practice closer to their workplace, thus enabling easier access to the surgery during the working week. Of course there is nothing wrong with wanting to offer more convenient NHS primary care, although I would quietly suggest that employers could be more flexible in allowing their employees to attend GP appointments; the wheels would not come off the local or national economy if such flexibility were more readily available.

If that was what was being proposed, I would not argue with it, and would not be debating the matter today, but that is not the full story. The Minister said in a speech to the Royal College of General Practitioners conference last month:

[David Taylor]

"The focus has to be on responding to the needs of patients...Enabling people to choose a different practice near home. Or one near to where they work. Or one with better overall quality scores and patient satisfaction but in a different location altogether."

That confirms that the Government's intentions are much more fundamental than an improvement to GP accessibility.

The proposal is more to do with the promotion of competition among GP services, supplemented by initiatives such as NHS Choices that utilise the information gleaned from the quality and outcomes framework to give the public somewhat simplistic statistics on GP practice performance. Given all the academic talk of quality and values, the most crucial issue is the future of the truly local services that GPs provide, particularly the invaluable home visits that they make to the homes of the long-term sick, the immobile and the terminally ill.

In the rush, in the words of the Health Secretary, to turn the NHS from "good to great", the Government risk ignoring the needs of that most vulnerable group of patients. I note parenthetically that the next debate in this Chamber is about age discrimination in health care. I shall read the *Hansard* report of that debate with great interest. The proposed reform does not seek to end home visits, but there is a very real risk that the needs of our fellow citizens with the most complex health problems will be put in direct competition with the health-care requirements of the more affluent workers and families. Each will have a QOF score, but there are no prizes for guessing who attracts the most points and, therefore, funding.

I regret to say that the potential of the change to worsen health inequalities goes even deeper than that. Those with the most complex health needs, particularly psychiatric ones, rely on social services that are geographically tied to the local authority. It does not take much imagination to realise that the consequences of abolishing GP practice boundaries may include an increase in the administrative complexity and cost of providing appropriate care packages for all who need them. Dementia patients living at home will be particularly vulnerable to instability and uncertainty.

All Labour Members hope that the Personal Care at Home Bill, which received its Second Reading this week, and the national care service will together ride to the rescue of all those with social care needs, but a period of uncertainty could result from the abolition of GP practice boundaries. I urge the Government and the Minister to think again, on these grounds alone. I should be most grateful if the Minister made a specific response about the impact of the reform on social care provision.

I turn to the intellectual threads of this reform. The spiritual leader of private health care in the NHS and former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), has rightly stated on numerous occasions that the health gap between rich and poor has grown inexorably since the creation of the NHS. However, that inescapable conclusion has little to do with structural failings within the NHS, as he would be quick to assert; it has more to do with the wealth of a small number of individuals and the private companies that respond to their every ailment, whether cosmetic or chronic.

It goes without saying that widening health inequality is a national concern, and I am pleased that the Government have commissioned Professor Sir Michael Marmot of University College London to consider how we could tackle health inequalities more effectively. We should all *look closely at his findings and recommendations*, and I hope that we will have an opportunity to debate them in the Chamber.

Men and women in our poorest communities are dying on average a decade or more before those of their generation in the most affluent areas. Putting it at its mildest, that is deeply troubling. However, that is due as much to the increased and inherent politicisation of this totemic institution since the 1980s. That culminated in the Labour Government putting up the money—but rarely the arguments—for maintaining the NHS wholly within the public sector.

With the abolition of practice boundaries, we will undoubtedly increase competition within the NHS. That will be especially so in urban areas, as GP practices have to compete for patients with NHS walk-in centres and one-stop primary care centres—the polyclinics championed in the Darzi review. That will merely distract the NHS from tackling health inequalities, as consistent and lengthy patient records will become more difficult to compile.

As someone with three decades in public sector IT, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that computer systems have a role to play in solving the problem, but the less said about the benighted NHS agency Connecting for Health the better. There is little doubt in my mind, however, that we would have had greater success in tackling health inequalities since 1997 if we had trusted and promoted the efficiency of the public sector over that of the private sector and its unseen and unaccountable backers and exploiters.

I mentioned the Darzi review a moment ago. We are all familiar with its aim of putting quality at the heart of the NHS. Who could disagree with that? I certainly would not, although I would question the use of other commercially-loaded terms by a senior Government appointee, who is supposed to be a clinical health specialist and not a management guru. Those phrases are more likely to come out of the mouth of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne), than one of our most successful and respected surgeons.

However, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington was Health Secretary, he said in a speech to the Commonwealth Fund in Washington 2002 that

"health care works best...when it harnesses the commitment and knowledge of clinicians to improve care for patients."

Private health insurer Kaiser Permanente of the US is cited as an example of that health care harmony, but I shall resist the temptation to be lured down that profitable but politically promiscuous avenue.

The Darzi review is the foundation for these troubling proposals in primary care, with a specific quote from Lord Darzi's summary letter in "High Quality Care for All" establishing the foundation upon which the Secretary of State decided to proceed.

Lord Darzi said:

"Patients will have greater choice of GP practice and better information to help them choose."

That raises the role of primary care trusts in designing and commissioning local primary care services, as they

also have a vital role to play in the democratisation of health care. By that I mean involving patients in the decisions that most affect their health, which is a welcome development. Leicestershire County and Rutland PCT seems to be going out of its way to illustrate to patients the worst excesses of the catchment area system that currently operates. For example, patients registered at Whitwick surgery who lived four miles or so away in Hugglescote were told by the PCT that they would have to leave that practice and re-register at Hugglescote. That was immensely distressing to the patients concerned, particularly pensioners who had built up a good relationship with the GPs at Whitwick over a number of years.

At this point, it is worth quoting Dr. Orest Mulka of the Measham medical unit. He is a highly respected GP at a well-regarded surgery in my constituency, and he said:

"Of course boundaries can be misused...but boundaries aren't just for the management of GP workload. They are there to allow a practice to identify with a community and see the health of their community as more than just the sum of individual conditions that are brought to them. They allow practices to develop a sense of pride of caring for their patch."

I repeat:

"They allow practices to develop a sense of pride of caring for their patch."

He went on to say:

" In my practice we don't discriminate—anyone living in our area is accepted on our list."

I shall use Dr. Mulka's comments as evidence against the Government's claim that abolishing practice boundaries will increase local accountability. If a patient is not a member of the local community, their needs may well be at odds and even in competition with those who live closest and who may have greater clinical need.

Whatever the number of patient participation groups, welcome though they are, they cannot hope to replace that local link. That reminds us of the consumer-led nature of the Government's proposal, which has been described as a move toward a "medical supermarket" where increasing numbers of patients are routinely seen, not by GPs, doctors or nurses, but by "health care professionals" such as "nurse consultants". We are some way from such dystopian scenarios, but the Government's obsessive delivery of pro-private policies in the NHS inevitably leads in that direction. Many people see the death knell of a publicly resourced and run NHS in proposals such as abolishing GP practice boundaries; creating polyclinics; making PCTs commissioners rather than providers of health care; encouraging NHS hospitals trusts to apply for foundation status; local improvement finance trusts; and—do not get me going on this—private finance initiatives. Moreover, there are other inappropriate and unnecessary market devices.

Such reforms are the logical conclusion to the brave new world of health care partnerships piloted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington when he was Health Secretary. The frequent speeches made during his tenure in Richmond house seemed intent on sending a chill down the spine of GPs and patients and included such baleful gems as the following examples. He said that

"tax funded health care can only be sustainable if it sits side by side with diversity in provision and choice for patients."

What he meant is that it is sustainable only when the local commissioning arrangements allow and indeed favour private sector bids for NHS work. He also talked about

"new private sector providers becoming a permanent feature of the NHS landscape."

Finally, he said:

"The NHS scores well on fairness but is weak on choice."

Those quotes are all from the same 2002 speech, but seem more akin to a sales pitch than a policy debate. Let us not forget that from 2001 to 2004 our former Prime Minister and right hon. Friend, Tony Blair, was advised on the NHS by Simon Stevens, who promptly joined the US firm UnitedHealth Group, which made $78.85 billion from health care services in 2008, after leaving the Downing street policy unit. By way of a footnote, let me say that at the same time as vehemently opposing President Obama's modest health care reforms in the US, UnitedHealth, with Simon Stevens on board, is bidding for and winning NHS contracts, and will no doubt regard the abolition of GP practice boundaries as welcome "mood music" at the very least.

To return to the local impact of the Government's plan, Dr. Eynon has concluded that, once again, the change is one that suits the well, working person. That brings to mind the inverse care law that I cited at the start of my speech. We must not shape our primary care system around the needs of the middle-class, peripatetic, urban elite who go to their local paper and MP every time they cannot get an appointment to treat their squash injury, as we should not normalise or accommodate the social and environmental impact of fundamentally selfish lifestyles.

By 2018, when the NHS reaches its biblical span of three score years and 10, we shall have seen GPs metamorphose from the avuncular community leaders of "Dr. Finlay's Casebook" to profit-generating assets in a Dr. Foster's cost centre. The NHS was not created to serve a minority who shout loud enough to see a doctor whenever they want, wherever they are. This proposal is designed to satisfy the few, not the many. To abolish practice boundaries is to hasten the demise of the family doctor.

11.15 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), my constituency neighbour, on securing the debate and on his lively and interesting speech.

Although practice boundaries will be the main focus of my remarks, I also want to address the wider issue of competition and choice within the NHS, because my hon. Friend has made his feelings so plain. It will not surprise him to know that I have some sympathy with a few of his points. I, too, am very conscious of the fact that our party founded the NHS. It was a service to be paid for from taxation, free at the point of need and primarily provided through the public service.

However, in respect of some of the comments about marketisation in primary care, we need to bear it in mind that the NHS has always been a deal between the private and public sectors, because most GPs operate independent private businesses that contract with the NHS, and have done since 1948. Therefore, we must be

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

a little careful when we discuss the private sector, because some GPs talk about the private sector as if it were something different from them. Actually, they are in the private sector, but they contract with the public sector.

We have an excellent record in primary care, as confirmed by a report earlier this year from the prestigious Commonwealth Fund, but we should never be satisfied. Although many GP practices are excellent, not all are. I agree with my hon. Friend that the most deprived parts of the country sometimes have the poorest provision of primary care with fewer doctors and greater demand—poorer areas tend to have people with a number of medical conditions that need urgent care.

We cannot simply rely on current general practice to address such problems. That approach has been tried for 60 years and it just has not worked. In some places, patients may be restricted to a single practice. They may wish to move, but find it difficult to do so. That is all very well if their practice is good, but what if it is not? We are now pursuing a different approach, investing in 112 new GP practices delivered by any willing provider with a strong track record on reducing health inequalities.

Choice and competition can drive up access and quality, which is important. We are working to improve the quality of primary care in different areas. One thing that GP-led health centres have done is locate in some of the most deprived areas in the country. We have had great difficulty in getting GPs to work in such areas. They find the work hard and the profits small, because the amount of private work that they get is limited. We have invested huge sums over the past decade in new premises, new technology and many more doctors, nurses and other health care professionals.

Yesterday, I went to Barking where a new family centre has been set up. GPs and dentists were encouraged to locate in a deprived area to ensure that it offered the quality of care that local people needed. As a result of many of those people training in that area—I also visited a centre in the Isle of Dogs—some GPs and dentists have chosen to come back and work there because the facilities are good and the buildings new, and they realise that deprived areas can bring a great deal of job satisfaction.

David Taylor: I am listening very carefully to what the Minister has to say. Does he agree that the bigger polyclinics that are envisaged—where a patient may go and, in a sense, be allocated at random a doctor from a very large panel—will make it very difficult indeed to build a relationship of the type that has been the foundation of our health service since 1948, which is that between a patient and a family doctor?

Mr. O'Brien: I think that the NHS and the relationship between patients and GPs have changed since 1948. Some patients want to see the same doctor, particularly if they have a long-term medical condition and they do not want to have to explain their problems all over again to a new doctor. However, some patients are not worried about whether they see the same doctor. If a patient does not have a long-term condition and is, in effect, seeing a GP at random—they might have developed a condition that they just want advice on—they may not be bothered about which GP they see.

There is a tradition of sorts that the relationship between patient and doctor is sanctified. For some people it is, but for others it is not, and we must provide an NHS that enables those people who want to see a particular doctor to see that doctor and those people who are not bothered in the least about which doctor they see not to have to see the same doctor continually. Some people I know do not want to see their allocated doctor at all. They happen to have been allocated to that doctor and end up seeing them. I remember that at some point in the past, although thankfully not at the moment, that was the case for people in my family.

Therefore, we need to ensure that people are able to see the GP who best suits them. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that many people want to see the same GP, but some are not bothered about which GP they see.

We need to provide people with choice, because choice and competition can both make a difference to patients and improve the quality of care. The polyclinics are based in London; we do not have them elsewhere. We have GP-led health centres elsewhere and many are very successful, but the development of polyclinics, which was restricted to the capital, has been enormously successful, particularly in deprived areas. Polyclinics have brought GPs to deprived areas and improved the quality of care in those areas, which we want to continue to work on.

We have pushed power away from Westminster and Whitehall into the hands of primary care trusts, through the world-class commissioning programme, and directly to individual and groups of GPs, through practice-based commissioning. That is all about providing the best possible service for patients—an aspiration that I am sure my hon. Friend shares.

As the Secretary of State has set out, where NHS services are providing excellent quality and performing at the level of the very best, there is no ideological predisposition to look to the market. On the contrary—we want health care provided in the best way that the NHS can possibly provide it. The public service is our preferred provider, but if it is not providing we have to look elsewhere, because the patient comes first.

Where NHS services can deliver, that is good—we want them to deliver—but we are also saying that patients need more power to choose the service that suits them. We in the Labour party created patient choice, precisely because we believe that it should be the interests of patients, rather than those of providers, that determine how health care is provided in this country.

We have already given people far greater choice through the introduction of 90 NHS walk-in centres, which are used by 3 million people every year, and, more recently, through the introduction of GP-led health centres, which enables someone to walk in to see a GP or a nurse while remaining registered at their own GP practice. People can go to the GP-led health centre if they have a random or minor health issue, but if they have a long-term health issue they can still go to see their own GP. They have a choice. Despite fierce opposition to GP-led health centres from some parts of the medical profession and from elsewhere, they have, by and large, proved very popular with patients. Overall, nearly 3 million people have used such a centre already.

Evidence from the UK and from overseas shows that treatments are more effective if patients choose, understand and control their own care. We are putting ever more

information about services in the hands of the public. That information will include the waiting times for a particular hospital and the personal comments of patients at a GP practice, so patients can comment on how good their GP practice is.

This process is slowly transforming the traditional doctor-patient relationship, in a way that gives the patient more power. Some GPs do not like it, but it gives patients more power. A more empowered and informed patient can take a more active role in their own care. They can decide, with their own doctor, which hospital to be treated at, and they can take a rational decision about which GP practice is best for them.

The NHS constitution already gives people the right to choose their own GP practice, but for many people that choice is severely limited. Most patients can choose between only a few practices and some patients have no choice at all. That limited choice reduces the competition between practices to attract patients and weakens the incentive for some GP practices to improve quality. Under the constitution, a GP practice must accept a patient's choice unless there are reasonable grounds for not doing so. At the moment, being outside a practice's boundary counts as reasonable grounds.

As my hon. Friend said, in September the Secretary of State set out our intention that, within 12 months, people should be able to register wherever they choose. For now, the practice that lies closest to someone's home may not be the easiest for them to get to.

I ask my hon. Friend to consider his constituents who commute to work and who may find it far simpler to see a GP near their work rather than taking half a day off to see a GP closer to their home. It is all very well to say, as he did, that employers should be more understanding, but some employers just are not so understanding. In addition, many people get paid by the hour, so they would lose money if they had to take more time off work to see a GP.

I also ask my hon. Friend to consider people with children who go to school beyond the boundary of their GP's practice. Those people may find it easier to register with a GP nearer the school, keeping time off school to a minimum should their child need to see a doctor. Furthermore, some of his constituents may want to change their GP practice because of the better quality of services available at other practices in their area. They may even want to register with the practice closest to their home but cannot do so because it lies just the other side of a line or boundary, or perhaps because of the "closed shop" arrangements that exist in some areas, because a GP practice's list of patients is full or because lines have been agreed about where the boundary between practices will exist.

The qualities and outcomes framework—the new arrangements to ensure that GPs provide greater health care—has attracted a lot of attention, because money is attached to it. The key thing is that the funding formula is weighted in favour of those people with long-term medical conditions and the elderly. Indeed, there is clear evidence that, since QOF was introduced, health inequalities have narrowed—that is what it is all about. Money follows the patient, so offering people a choice gives practices a strong incentive to improve and attract new patients and retain existing ones.

Similarly, part of the positive impact of the new GP-led health centres has been that they have led other practices to open for longer and to expand their practice boundaries, so that they can compete with new services such as the GP-led health centres. Choice means better access to higher-quality medical care and I cannot see how anyone would want people not to have choice, if that is what choice indeed means.

Of course, given a choice most people will stay exactly where they are; I believe that that is what most people will do. Only a limited number of people want to exercise choice in this regard and, yes, sometimes they are well, middle-class people who just want the choice. Why on earth should they not have it? If they want it, the NHS should be able to provide them with it.

I do not want people to have to go off somewhere and pay privately to get a choice that they really ought to have within the NHS. Frankly, if people are well, young and middle-class, I want them to use the NHS and stay with it. I want them to realise that the NHS will give them a choice, so that later on, when they perhaps really need the NHS for their kids or for themselves when they develop a long-term condition, they will stay with the NHS—those are the people we want too.

However, my hon. Friend is right that we also need to ensure that we care for the people who really need the NHS. They include people from the mining community, such as some of his constituents and some of mine, who have long-term health care conditions. We want to ensure that such people receive the service and the priority that they need.

People with complex long-term medical conditions will want to maintain the continuity of being registered with their local GP, especially when so much of their care will involve other local organisations such as social services, community nursing and diagnostic services.

We want to ensure that where patients want choice, they get it. However, most patients who do not need that choice should not have it forced upon them. In the end, it remains something that patients should choose or not choose for themselves. It is a matter for them.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Age Discrimination (Health Care)

2.30 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to address this important issue on the day on which we rise for the Christmas recess. One curious thing about the lottery process for *Adjournment* debates is that one can apply assiduously for a topic for many a week, then find that one has the pleasure of securing it on the last day before we adjourn for Christmas. I am sure that we can therefore look forward to a quality debate but not a quantitatively long one.

Many aspects of health care give rise to concerns about how age is used as a proxy to determine—or, in some cases, deny—access to health care, even when the evidence does not support such practices. There is plenty of evidence that age discrimination takes place in cancer and stroke care, cardiology, foot care and continence and palliative care. Rather than going through the evidence for discrimination relating to each of those conditions, I will focus on one area that demands urgent attention—mental health.

After reviewing the literature and evidence, it is hard not to reach the conclusion that the national health service is institutionally ageist. That is certainly the view of doctors specialising in the care of older people, so I welcomed the Secretary of State's admission in October that age discrimination is still commonplace in health care a decade after the national service framework for older people was meant to have banned age bars and age discrimination across the NHS. It is clear that relative to mental health services for people of working age, the mental health services available to older people have got worse. I stress the word "relative" because there have been clear improvements in some aspects of mental health care for working-age people.

I recently hosted a reception in the House on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to highlight its call to action at a local level and on the part of individual clinicians. I am grateful to the Royal College for providing me with a briefing for this debate. If we took what we know from the published research and applied it to a typical group of 10,000 people over 64, this is what we would find: 2,500 would have a diagnosable mental illness. Of those, 1,350 would have depression, 500 would have dementia and 650 would have other mental illnesses. Most of those people would go undiagnosed and untreated. According to the King's Fund, older people are the only part of the population in which the number of people with mental illness will increase by 2026. If nothing else, we are required to address that demographic demand. A concerted response from Government and the NHS at all levels is necessary.

Inevitably, debates such as this—I am sure that the Minister has experienced this on many occasions—turn on what is wrong and needs to be put right rather than dwelling on what is good and wonderful. I make no apology for that, as I hope that he understands that this debate is about raising concerns. I accept that the present Government have not been idle. National service frameworks, "New Horizons", psychological therapies and the national dementia strategy are just a few of the initiatives that they have taken. However, I am concerned that insufficient attention has been paid to the mental health needs of older people. That lack of attention is not just harmful to the individuals concerned; it wastes taxpayers' money on late and inappropriate interventions and treatment.

To illustrate, in a typical 500-bed district hospital, an average of 330 beds are occupied by older people, 220 of whom have a mental illness. A shortage of trained staff and age-appropriate services mean that those patients remain in hospital for longer and are more likely to be readmitted as emergencies later. The Government have focused on dementia, with good reason; I have no objection whatever to that. The national strategy is welcome, as was the recent announcement on anti-psychotic drugs. I thank the Minister for getting in touch with me on the day of that announcement. However, a much broader approach to the development of age-appropriate mental health services is required in order to drive change.

The World Health Organisation forecasts that depression will be the second biggest contributor to health costs by 2020, just 10 years from now. The rate of depression is set to rise by 30 per cent. among over-75s, and by 80 per cent. among over-85s by 2026, just 16 years from now. Depression is three times more common than dementia and it increases with age, with the poorest most at risk. It is linked to a greater reduction in health than any other long-term condition, and it leads to a sharper decline in overall health when combined with any other long-term condition.

Nevertheless, just one in six older people with depression receives any treatment, compared with one in two younger people with depression. It is a major risk factor for suicide and the cause of 80 per cent. of suicides. Although it is good news that the suicide rate has fallen in the past decade, it has not changed among older people. As a result, the suicide rate in people over 65 is double that of people under 25. Research evidence also shows that older people with mental illness stay in hospital longer and are more likely to die in hospital or to lose their independence and be discharged to a care home.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and I accept that he might be about to develop this point. However, does he agree that one concern, which I suspect we share, is that the amount of research effort, particularly into dementia, Alzheimer's and the mental health of the elderly, needs to match the demographic curve? We need to put the research effort behind where things are going. At the moment, there is some question in most people's minds about that. Is he equally concerned?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that concern, which I hope is shared by all parties. He is two pages ahead of me, but I will return to that point, if I may.

One study found that a person suffering from undiagnosed dementia is three times more likely to die in hospital than other older people. The same research also found that a large number of admissions were inappropriate and could have been prevented by prompt medical care in the community. Lack of specialist assessment is a recurring theme linked to poor-quality care, poor outcomes and waste of taxpayers' money.

Why are things like this, and what needs to change? The introduction of a national service framework on mental health in 1999 kick-started change and investment

in new services, but the drafting of the frameworks reflects an age bias. One need only look at the fact that 149 pages in the NSF for mental health are devoted to the mental health of people of working age, compared with just 17 pages on mental health in the older people's national service framework. What does that tell us about relative priorities a decade ago? The national directors of both mental health and older people's services accepted in 2004 that not as much progress had been made in developing new mental health services for older people, and I am told by the Royal College of Psychiatrists that little has changed since then.

As I said earlier, the progress made for working-age people means that older people with mental health issues are worse off now in relative terms than they were 10 years ago. A serious lack of equity remains in access to mental health services. My point is not to claim a lack of good intent on the Government's part; policy initiatives and national guidelines exist. However, the evidence is compelling that none of that has gained any traction on resource allocation and practice. The National Audit Office has documented how older people have been denied access to assertive outreach, crisis resolution, home treatment and early intervention services available to adults of working age. Other research has revealed a similar pattern of exclusion from hospital liaison, rehabilitation and psychotherapy.

What needs to be done? As I said, the national dementia strategy is welcome. It is an essential although insufficient response to the mental health needs of older people. The Minister and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) will know that I have a keen interest in dementia research. Only yesterday, I had the pleasure of receiving an answer to a written question to the Minister about the new ministerial taskforce on dementia research. I was fascinated by the answer:

"The remit of the group will be to maintain the momentum begun at the summit by developing a new vision for the future of dementia research and advising on practicable ways to achieve that vision."

Visions are all well and good. They are useful because people can be pointed towards them. However, a taskforce on research must assemble the building blocks of the additional cash that needs to be invested in the area.

The answer goes on to say that the first part of the body's remit is

"to devise ways to use available resources more effectively to help increase the volume and impact of high quality dementia research".—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2009; Vol. 502, c. 739W.]

That implies that existing cash is to be used, rather than that more will be allocated, and we know that there is a huge gulf between the amounts committed to dementia research and to conditions such as stroke, heart disease and cancer. Finally, the answer states that membership of the body has yet to be finalised. It was announced in July. Five months on, it has not met and its membership is not yet set. Will the Minister say when it will begin its task?

Investment in improving psychological therapies is welcome. However, time will tell whether we will see an equitable roll-out. One in five older people's mental health services report having no access to clinical psychology and one in three community teams do not include clinical psychologists. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy commissioned an independent review on counselling older people, which concluded that counselling is effective with older people, particularly in the treatment of depression.

It is disappointing that mental health services are not included in the Government's new entitlements regime that replaces the existing framework. For example, if a person is waiting for cognitive behavioural therapy and the 18-week milestone is passed, there is no redress. There is no funding to allow them to get the provision elsewhere. Why were mental health services left out of the entitlements approach? I am sure that will be of interest to many people outside the House.

An evidence-based approach to developing age-appropriate mental health services would save money and deliver better outcomes for older people. Older people's hospital liaison services save money. They reduce the length of hospital stays, cut readmissions and result in better outcomes. For example, a Liverpool hospital that had a high readmission rate for older people set up a specialist liaison mental health team for older people in 1999. An analysis of 324 high-risk people who were referred to the team's social worker because they had complex needs found that they had a 7 per cent. lower six-month readmission rate than the hospital's older patients in general. It also found that 96 per cent. of referrals were assessed on the day of referral and, of the readmissions, only 13.5 per cent. were considered inappropriate.

Care home liaison can save time and money. It can also help to reduce anti-psychotic drug prescribing—something on which I have campaigned for many years, so I welcome the recent announcements. It is estimated if we made the changes needed in that area we would save £55 million a year. A specialist older people's mental health care team in Doncaster runs a home liaison team to provide services to care homes. That has helped to reduce admissions to hospital, improve the quality of care and provide training to care home staff. In its first year, the team received 460 referrals and admissions to hospital reduced by 75 per cent.

Crisis home treatment teams can cut hospital admission rates by a third, reduce the length of hospital stays and reduce admissions to long-term care. In west Suffolk, a crisis resolution home treatment team for working-age adults was extended to include over-65s. Older people had previously had no alternative to being admitted to hospital. Most people with whom the team dealt were suffering from depression. The number of older people admitted fell by 31 per cent. as a result of the extension of the scheme, without any loss in patient or carer satisfaction. There is huge potential to unlock resources and reallocate them to services that deliver better outcomes for patients.

Delivering age-appropriate mental health services requires a more informed work force in primary care, general hospitals, care homes and social care, as they must be able to tailor services to fit individual and age-specific needs. The last remaining barriers within and between health and social care need to be torn down. Integration of services is essential to delivering equity and efficiency. Mechanisms such as local area agreements should play a part in ensuring that we have seamless services with integration and multi-agency working on the ground.

Older people's mental health should be a national priority in the NHS operating framework. I was disappointed to read today in a written answer from the Secretary of State that the new operating framework for

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2010-11 is silent on that and that mental health services do not register as a national priority. Not even the dementia strategy registers as a national priority. That is a missed opportunity and a great shame. If guidance, policies and strategies are to get traction, they need to be backed up.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I did not spot the written answer, as I was engaged on something else this morning. However, if the framework suggests that mental health, let alone dementia, is not a national priority, does the hon. Gentleman think that that is an admitted change from what was promulgated under previous Secretaries of State, which was that cancer, cardiac and mental health services were the three priorities that the Government were seeking to address?

Mr. Burstow: That was my reading of the Secretary of State's written answer. If there is a misunderstanding, I would rather the Minister cleared it up today. Certainly, my reading of the written answer that was published today is that mental health services, including dementia services, do not feature at the top level of the operating framework. They have to be placed at the top level to get the traction that I assume the Government and the Department want the national strategy to have. I know that there is a debate over whether such decisions should be devolved locally. However, the Government clearly intend to drive change in dementia services. The only way to signal that intention is by making it clear in the framework. I want to get that on the record, and I hope that the Minister will clarify this matter in his response.

In conclusion, the biggest challenge to our health and social care system is the ageing population, as it has been for a decade or more. In particular, the challenge is the mental health of our ageing population. Currently, need is not being meet and evidence is not being translated into practice. There must be a shift in Government policy to the health needs of older people and a comprehensive approach must be developed. That must be a clear and unambiguous national priority. It is unsustainable to do nothing. There are huge opportunities in unlocking resources to make improvements. The case for concerted action is unanswerable. I look forward to the contributions of other hon. Members and to the Minister's response.

2.47 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Cook, and to speak in this important debate on the last day before the House rises. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on securing the debate and on his consistent and vigorous leadership on older people's issues. Long may he continue to be such a champion for older people.

According to leading older people's organisations, age discrimination remains the most common form of discrimination in this country. We must take it much more seriously. Perhaps this point is for a different debate, but that is largely due to the failure to put age discrimination on the same footing as other forms of discrimination. Although there are attempts to address that, concerns exist that there will not be the same clarity regarding age discrimination that there rightly is for other forms of discrimination. In a less obvious way, prejudice plays a part in the health and social care systems. Unfortunately, we still hear examples of older people facing neglect, receiving second-class services, being socially segregated and having restricted opportunities. Far more needs to be done to address that.

The figure to which my hon. Friend referred is shocking: almost half of all geriatricians think that the NHS's failure to provide older people with the level of care to which they are entitled amounts to institutional ageism. That is according to the leading geriatricians in the country, and we should all be deeply concerned about such comments. More than half of those same geriatricians—55 per cent.—said they were personally worried about their own prospects for receiving adequate care from the NHS when they are over 65. Alex Mair, chief executive of the British Geriatrics Society, was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying

"the NHS is currently failing older people".

The figures show that people over 65 already account for more than 60 per cent. of hospital bed days, and therefore are responsible for the greatest proportion of expenditure on health and social care. In 2007, 8.2 million people were aged over 65 in England and Wales. That figure is projected to increase to 11.6 million by 2026, which is an extraordinary increase of 46 per cent. Similar rises are projected for the prevalence of disability and dependency. The burden on the health and social care system will therefore increase.

A number of reports are worth mentioning: first, the report on the barriers facing older people, which was undertaken by Sir Ian Carruthers, the chief executive of NHS South West, and the Bristol council chief executive, Jan Ormondroyd. It found that older stroke patients received less adequate care than young sufferers, and that almost half of doctors who cared for older people believed that the NHS was institutionally ageist. I was concerned to see that the report goes on to show in some detail the treatment that my hon. Friend has outlined, particularly regarding mental health. The report "Equality in Later Life" also demonstrates that older people are discriminated against regarding access to out-of-hours and crisis services, psychological treatment and alcohol services.

I am afraid that there still appears to be institutional ageism within some of the main NHS services. On cancer, women aged over 70 are not automatically called for breast cancer screening, despite firm medical evidence of a clinical need for that service. Older women with breast cancer receive a lower level of care than younger women, and are less likely to be diagnosed via needle biopsy and triple assessment. They are also less likely to undergo surgery or receive radiotherapy than younger women. When compared with a 65 to 69 year-old woman, a woman aged 80 or older is five and a half times less likely to receive triple assessment for operable breast cancer, and 40 times less likely to undergo surgery. Even women as young as 70 or 74 are more than seven times less likely to receive radiotherapy following breast conservation surgery.

Department of Health figures suggest that compared with other comparable countries, the UK experiences 15,000 extra deaths from cancer a year in the over-75 age group. In relation to that figure, the gap between the

UK and other countries appears to be widening, as does the gap between older and younger age groups in UK.

On stroke treatment, older people are less likely to receive cholesterol-lowering treatments recommended for the secondary prevention of stroke, despite the treatment being equally medically effective across all age groups. Although rates of secondary drug prevention are generally low—26.4 per cent. of patients aged 50 to 59 received treatment compared with 15.6 per cent. of patients aged 80 to 89, with a figure of just 4.2 per cent. for those aged 90 or over—there are lower rates of treatment to prevent stroke in older people, and substantial under-investigation in routine clinical practices for patients aged 80 or over.

On cardiology, according to Age Concern and Help the Aged, 46 per cent. of GPs and care of the elderly specialists and 48 per cent. of cardiologists treated patients aged over 65 differently from other patients. People aged over 65 were less likely to be referred to a cardiologist, given an angiogram or given a heart stress test. Cardiologists were less likely to recommend operations to open up blocked coronary arteries for older patients, and older patients were less likely than younger people to be prescribed cholesterol-lowering statins.

I make those points before coming to the main topic covered by my hon. Friend: mental health. According to Age Concern and Help the Aged, mental health is the clearest example of age discrimination in health and social care policy. A report published in 2009 by the Royal College of Psychiatrists states that tens of thousands of people over the age of 65 are being denied access to specialist mental health services because of arbitrary age limits. That is primarily because the national service framework for mental health extends only to working adults up to the age of 65. There is simply not enough cross-over between such frameworks for mental health and older people. What steps will the Minister take to try to ensure that the frameworks work together more coherently, to ensure that older people cease to get a rough deal by apparently falling outside those frameworks and falling between two stools?

In a survey carried out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, members of the old-age faculty reported having been

"told of evidence that specialist services for older people with mental health problems, including dementia, are being cut purely to meet the financial pressures created elsewhere in the NHS, and to meet the demands of the Secretary of State that financial balance must be achieved".

Will the Minister say whether that survey finding is correct, because clearly that is of real concern? We are having a debate about already inadequate mental health services for older people, yet the Royal College of Psychiatrists survey shows that concern exists that services will be cut further.

The Government have of course invested extra money to fund working-age adult mental health services up to the age of 65 during the past three years. Clearly, that is welcome, and I think that people would say that services are improving. However, why should that stop at 65? If the framework is going to stop at 65, why is there not more of a mental health strategy for older people from the age of 65 onwards?

I share my hon. Friend's passion for pushing the dementia issue up the agenda, both in our hospitals and care homes and on the research side. That point was made by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), who speaks for the Conservatives. Unless we can start to ameliorate the effects of the many distressing conditions that come under the umbrella of dementia—and hopefully prevent those conditions and perhaps even find the cure—the real concern remains not only that we will fail to tackle the problem of inadequate health care for older people, but that we simply will not deal with the financial time bomb that will affect the NHS and the care system.

The amount of funding for dementia care—I have raised this issue directly with the Prime Minister—remains inadequate. We are all aware that the recession and the reduced funds available to the Government and to us all is an issue; nevertheless, we must look at the impact of not investing more in dementia research. Dementia still receives only 3 per cent. of the medical research budget. I suspect we would all agree that that simply does not add up to a sensible proportion, considering the number of people currently suffering from forms of dementia, the effect on their families and on their ability to work, and the huge demographic increase in the number of older people projected to take place in the coming years.

The report, "New Horizons: A shared vision for mental health", states that funding for mental health research will triple. Will part of that be research on dementia, or is that a separate budget? Where will that money come from: is it from the existing research budget or a different pot of money? Can he say where the money will be targeted specifically? Will it deal with some of the mental health issues facing older people that we have raised today?

This is an important debate and I am pleased to have been able to contribute; it is a shame that more hon. Members have been unable to do so, perhaps because of the timing, as I am sure it is a matter of concern to many of us. Until older people receive the same care and service from our national health service as everyone else, there will still be a feeling that the institutional ageism that has been commented on by our leading physicians does exist.

3.1 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): I am well aware that St. Nicholas will be rushing down chimneys across the country in the coming week. He was born in 270 A.D. and is still going strong, so he should be a model for us all as we head into mature age. I have also discovered that the etymology of Nicholas is "victory of the people"—it may sound amazing, but it is—so it seems fitting to invoke him here in the mother of Parliaments. Whether he is a redistributive socialist or a right-wing philanthropist is a debate for another time, I suspect, however much hon. Members might encourage me to stray from our subject. All that allows me to wish you, Mr. Cook, the Minister and the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) a very merry Christmas.

The issue we are discussing is serious and one on which it is our job to hold the Government to account. I hope that the Government's response will be redolent of the spirit of good will to all men, and all women, and

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not disproportionately to some who are not old. It is also right during our debate, in thinking about discrimination, age, health care and general well-being, that we remember that many people cannot look forward to Christmases as we do, because of poverty or loneliness in this country or due to war abroad.

However much we disagree in this place, we are all here with equal mandates to make a difference and, through our aspirations, in their diverse ways, to make this country, and indeed this world, a better place for all people of all ages. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam on securing the debate and giving the matter the airing it indubitably merits, and the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West on the reinforcement he provided.

With the Equality Bill having received its Second Reading in the other place only yesterday, it seems apt to begin with the Government's pronouncements in that Bill on age discrimination. The Opposition have made it clear that we welcome the Government's inclusion of age discrimination in the debate surrounding the Bill. The Minister for Women and Equality asserted on Second Reading of the Bill in this place:

"No one should suffer the indignity of discrimination—to be told, 'You're old, so you're past it'".—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2009; Vol. 492, c. 553.]

Although she no doubt intended her words to apply primarily to the workplace, they highlight a chasm in the Government's thinking on age discrimination—the NHS and social services.

Our social care system is still predicated on age banding, at 18 and—topically—at 65. Indeed, the Government are clutching somewhat desperately to the 65 cliff edge in their rapidly collapsing attempts to reform social care. Disability living allowance has been safeguarded for those under 65, but not for those over 65, under the recent pronouncements and the very words of the Secretary of State for Health. I say "rapidly collapsing" because last week the Secretary of State said, as we all heard, that there would be "no cash losers" among those currently receiving attendance allowance and disability living allowance. Given that the reforms in the Green Paper are based on the roll-up of such benefits into the funding package, presumably the Government are not planning to reform social care for those in receipt of those benefits.

Furthermore, the Government have given no pledge that people in the future who have needs similar to those who currently receive attendance allowance and disability living allowance will receive an equivalent cash benefit. That is why we continue to hold them to account over that issue. To pick up on the Prime Minister's pre-election report, we will soon be fighting an election to protect not only today's pensioners, but those of the future.

The great irony is that if the Government had not played politics with the Green Paper; if they had been open and honest and published the full modelling that we and all the charities in the Care and Support Alliance called for in advance of the deadline for responses to the Green Paper consultation, but which was not forthcoming—I stress that point in case they reply that they have published something; and if the Prime Minister had not decided to run an election manifesto through the reform with his attempted but failed dividing lines, they might never have caused that confusion over the issue in the policy world, in charities and, above all, in the minds of older, and often vulnerable, people.

The reforms of social care being debated by the Government have also failed to address carers and their benefits. Nothing has been done about the cliff edge that exists for carers who earn; I am focusing on the reference to age discrimination in the title of the debate. There is no ability set out in the reforms to smooth benefits to reward work. More pertinent to the debate is the Government's failure to instigate a discussion of the fact that carer's allowance stops at 65. Where will the equality legislation leave that issue? I hope the Minister clarifies that.

Mr. Burstow: Would it not also be helpful if the Minister said whether he is minded to bring forward the timetable for doing something about benefit reform? The carers strategy refers to 2018, which is a rather long time to wait.

Mr. O'Brien: That is a fair request, so perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity to address it. It is particularly fair in the light of how the social care reform Green Paper has been transmuting and transforming itself over recent days, rather than over a planned period of years, or even weeks or months. It has undergone the most radical transformation of policy in the past few days, some would say on the hoof.

The hon. Gentleman's point is fair, because the Government seem to be inconsonant with the timetable, which seems to be advancing rapidly on one side, but with the benefits not being addressed effectively and being postponed until 2018. The Minister will have the opportunity to respond to that.

Only last month a report commissioned by the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), found that elderly people frequently receive worse health care than their younger counterparts—a point that has already been referred to. It laid the serious charge that, in an institutional sense, the NHS discriminates against those people. That was covered fairly extensively in media reports at the end of October. Doctors identified patients over the age of 65 and suffering from mental illness as particularly prone to discrimination, as has been emphasised.

I turn now to mental health. A Royal College of Psychiatrists report found that tens of thousands of people over 65 are being denied access to specialist mental health services because of the "arbitrary" age limits, which is precisely the point that has already been referred to. Mental health services have traditionally been configured by age, which means that someone aged 65 can receive a wide range of support through adult mental health services, but a person who is only one year older, regardless of their need, might be placed in an older people's service where the same support is simply not available.

The over-65s are also denied access to a range of services available to younger adults, including psychological therapies, early intervention, and rehabilitation and addiction services. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam placed particular emphasis on that point. I should therefore emphasise equally the fact that I hope

that the Minister will clarify the situation, particularly given that several interventions were made, which have been answered.

The written answer that the hon. Gentleman received restates the Government's priorities, but omits mental health, which we thought was one of the three issues to have been promulgated as being of great importance over the past decade.

The other question that has arisen relates to the priority that will be given to different areas. Will there be a reallocation of resources? Will there be any extra resources? The issue cropped up during our most recent proceedings on the Personal Care at Home Bill in our debate about the potential for an increase or a reduction in the cash available to dementia research, commensurate with the demographics. We would expect the research effort to match the curve of rising demand.

I hope that the Minister explains what impact the Equality Bill will have. I hope, too, that he tells us what work his Department is doing to change cultures in our NHS. He will readily agree that the blunt weapon of legislation is simply not enough to bring about systemic change.

Earlier this year, as a result of a large exercise involving written parliamentary questions and freedom of information requests, the shocking number of older people who suffer malnutrition in our NHS hospitals became clear to me, and I decided to expose it. The figures show that 70 per cent. of all malnutrition deaths occur among the elderly. The Minister will know that every year—certainly over the past 12 years—an average of 204 people have died of malnutrition. In 2006-07, the number of patients discharged from hospital with a diagnosis of malnutrition, nutritional anaemia or other nutritional deficiencies was 139,127—an 84 per cent. increase over 1997-98 levels. There was a 12 per cent. increase in the number of patients discharged from hospital in such a state in the last year alone.

Such things matter because the number of patients leaving hospital with a diagnosis of malnutrition was 8,533 more than the number of people entering hospital in a malnourished state. That includes those who, unfortunately, went into hospital and, whatever their condition, died there, so the number is all the more worrying. The figures suggest that the nutritional status of at least that number of patients worsened while they were in hospital in 2007.

Malnutrition is not a condition that we associate with Britain, and least of all with our NHS, but the Government have presided over that increase. My colleagues and I have exposed the figures, and we wait to see what the Government response will be to these malnutrition cases, particularly those among the elderly. Surely, such things can be avoided.

The rise of malnutrition among the elderly points to underlying problems in the most basic forms of care that our elderly receive. If our elderly cannot even guarantee that they will be fed well in hospital, no wonder an increasing number of older people and their relatives are expressing concerns about the standard of care that the elderly receive through the NHS.

That is not to run down the NHS. There are solutions and there are some absolutely marvellous examples of best practice, such as the red tray system, which provides an alert without the need to face down the older person over their need for help with feeding. Above all, however, we need enough capacity so that nurses can sit at an older person's bedside and help them feed, rather than sitting behind a screen filling out target forms.

It is important to explain how we create a stronger voice for patients, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable. Legislation may make the NHS accountable to the Government, but the patients should be given the real power to hold the NHS to account. The local involvement networks initiative, or LINks, betrays the Government's failure to create an effective and prominent platform to allow patients to voice their views about the NHS. The Government have not been prepared to make the initiative independent of the NHS. It has been a mark of this Government that they have consistently sought to undermine the patient voice.

In that respect, I am particularly critical of the Government. At Prime Minister's questions, I exposed the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who said that he had consulted before axing community health councils. He then had to write me a grovelling three-page apology to say that the Government had done no such thing and that they just did not like CHCs because they criticised the NHS. All but four of the 107 CHCs were excellent, but Labour abolished them without consultation. They did not like the criticism from CHCs, which were able to amalgamate much of the evidence. In that respect, things such as Bedwatch were very important.

The CHC system was not particularly comfortable for the Government or, let us face it, the previous Conservative Government, because CHCs were independent. However, patients trusted them because they felt that they could have their hands held without being put offside with the NHS, whose services they still needed because they were vulnerable. Patients needed the respect that they could get from organisations that they could trust, and that was possible because CHCs were independent.

Having replaced CHCs with patient and public involvement forums, the Government found that those, too, were too outspoken—particularly the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health, which was the national voice. The Government therefore abolished those forums and replaced them with LINks. The contempt in which the Government held the patient voice was shown by their tagging of the issue on to another portmanteau Bill—this time, a local government Bill.

Now, Ministers are starving LINks of the resources that they need to become established and effective. I dare say that many hon. Members are receiving representations from LINks that are trying to make it clear that they do not have the resources that they need to do the job that they are required to do.

Mr. Burstow: How does the hon. Gentleman see the arrangement with LINks going forward? One reason why CHCs were successful and trusted was that they had been around for a long time—a feature that we have not seen for the past decade because of the constant changes. Do we not now need some stability and an opportunity for LINks to bed down? That is certainly true in my patch, where they have been delivering some quite interesting reports, including on age discrimination.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point. Some of the better-performing

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LINks have often been those that bravely stuck with it through the changes. They have provided continuity and a sense of expertise, and they have benefited from a familiarity with the labyrinthine processes of the NHS, social care and other areas.

Rather than completely abandoning LINks, the solution is to ensure that they develop healthily and fit into the context of the Health Watch policy, which the hon. Gentleman will know well, because the Conservative party has had it in the public domain for the past four years, and I will describe it in a second. That will help to cover the point.

One lesson to be learned from what recently took place in Stafford relates in part to the Government's poor support for LINks and to the lack of a strong local patient voice that can hold trust executives, NHS executives and, ultimately, Ministers to account. That is an ongoing problem. The Conservative party has therefore suggested a national and local independent voice to allow patients to highlight their concerns, as well as increased choice over services, which will enable patients to vote with their feet.

As we begin to move towards a system of payment under which local NHS services are funded according to the outcomes that they achieve for patients, rather than top-down bureaucratic targets, the patient's perspective on their treatment will become increasingly important.

As I made clear to the Older People's Advocacy Alliance earlier this year, we must ensure that older people, particularly those who lack the capacity to express concerns about their care, are given equal access to forums through relatives and appointed advocates. Again, we return to the important distinction between central legislation and grass-roots activity. Legislation can go only so far before older people require local advocates and trained, sympathetic staff—sometimes NHS staff—to ensure that the care they receive off the national radar is of a high quality.

As a corollary to that, I am pleased that the Government are finally conceding that quality is a far better indicator of improved health care than activity-based targets. However, cases such as that of Staffordshire general hospital and, most recently, that of Basildon and Thurrock University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust demonstrate the distance that there is to travel before the rhetoric penetrates to the grass roots of patient care.

Conservatives strongly advocate a shift towards clinical outcomes as a measure of performance in the NHS. With that shift comes a great deal of responsibility towards vulnerable older people, in whose cases it may not be possible to achieve a better outcome or a full recovery. That is an important qualification.

We must ensure that measures such as dignity, nutrition and comfort are rewarded as highly as clinical outcomes in caring for the elderly. There must be no disincentive to delivering quality care to a person whose health is unlikely to improve. On the contrary, we must incentivise NHS staff to ensure that older people receive the care that is appropriate to their needs, regardless of their health.

Our pledge, of which the Minister is well aware, to introduce a payment by results tariff for palliative care will help to ensure that there are services on offer for older people who are terminally ill and who want a dignified and comfortable death. It was with great regret that I witnessed the Government voting against the Palliative Care Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) earlier this year. The Bill was intended to give people the right to choose where they die, whether at home, in a hospice or in hospital. Too many older people do not have that choice and are forced to die in hospital because palliative care cannot be made available elsewhere.

I have already mentioned the case of Stafford and the more recent revelations about the standards of care at Basildon and Thurrock University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and elsewhere. Those cases have emphasised the fact that a hospital's foundation trust status does not offer patients a guarantee of quality health care. It is more important than ever that we should have an effective and rigorous system of regulation at an appropriate level to ensure that hospitals that are failing vulnerable patients such as the elderly do not slip through the net. What is more, regulation must penetrate deeper into standards of care than tick-box targets. The news headlines of recent months only accentuate further the disparity that can exist between a hospital's record on paper and the reality of the care it delivers. So often it is the elderly who are caught in the vortex.

It is vital that inspections should be carried out in person by professionals equipped with the expertise needed to identify poor care. Serious questions have been raised about the effectiveness of the Care Quality Commission, and the Government must prove to patients that they can establish a robust and trusted regulator who can act on their complaints and root out poor practice in the NHS—a regulator who is not at anyone's beck and call, least of all of politicians, but who acts independently on the basis of evidence. Effective regulation is more important than ever in the case of many elderly people who are not in a position to stand up for their own rights or treatment.

I want to touch on the subject of cancer care. It goes without saying that older people's health needs are typically more complex than those of other NHS patients, yet it is older people who face the brunt of discrimination in the NHS. Cancer predominantly affects older people, and the risk of developing many cancers increases with age. Nearly two thirds of cancer diagnoses occur in those over the age of 60, yet despite the high proportion of elderly people who face a cancer diagnosis, access to treatment is far from fair.

Women aged over 70 are not automatically called for breast cancer screening, despite evidence that eight out of 10 breast cancer cases occur in post-menopausal women. What is more, a Roche report reveals that only 30 per cent. of oncologists would prescribe the cancer-fighting drug Herceptin for breast cancer in a 73-year-old patient, compared to 90 per cent. who would prescribe the drug to a 55-year-old.

Inequalities are also prevalent in the treatment of lung cancer. The findings of the national lung cancer audit indicate that the proportion of lung cancer patients in England and Wales who receive active anti-cancer treatment falls with age from more than 60 per cent. for those under 54 to 50 per cent. at 70 to 74 and less than 30 per cent. at 80 to 84. Older people also struggle to get access to stroke treatment and cardiology services—a point that has already been made in the debate—and

find that they are frequently pushed to the back of the queue for referral to a specialist and for preventive treatments.

In conclusion, in the next 20 years the number of people over the age of 65 will double, and the number over the age of 100 will quadruple. As pressure on the NHS increases, it is more important than ever to iron out discrimination and ensure that health care is delivered on the basis of need, not age. I hope that the Minister will today give a firm pledge to tackle discrimination head on and ensure that our elderly people, many of whom come to the NHS in a vulnerable and fragile state, are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve, and above all equally.

3.23 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on securing this debate.

The Government believe—we always have believed and will always believe—that we must do everything we can to end discrimination against all age groups, including older people. Today's debate focuses primarily on discrimination against older people, which is a defining issue of our times. It gives me an excellent opportunity, unlike some other Westminster Hall debates, to lay out the breadth of the Government's response to the issue of discrimination in health care for older people and what we are doing to address it, as well as to deal with some of the issues that hon. Members raised during the debate.

It has been interesting for me to hear the views of the Front-Bench spokesmen—the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) for the Liberal Democrats and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) for the Conservatives—on what their priorities are, or are not, and the commitments that they are making at this stage in the electoral cycle. Older people will be paying attention to that. I did not hear a single commitment from either party, but it is for those listening to and observing the debate to draw their own conclusions.

As demography reshapes society, Governments, employers and public services have to find new ways to improve the support that is available to older people, not just in sickness but in health. We need to create a society of all ages, and that is the explicit goal of our new ageing strategy, which none of the hon. Members who have spoken in the debate have mentioned. I agree that high-quality, patient-centred health services are a key to that.

Hon. Members will know that when the Equality Bill, which is now being considered in the other place, is enacted—and I hope that it will be—it will make age discrimination illegal across all sectors, including health and social care, and will extend the public sector equality duty to cover age. We plan to bring the new public sector equality duty into force from April 2011 and the discrimination ban from 2012. Hon. Members have failed during the debate to mention the NHS constitution, which makes the commitment to a

"comprehensive health service, available to all irrespective of gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief."

Those are powerful statements of intent from the Government and will certainly sharpen minds in the years ahead. However, they must be backed up by real action on the ground.

Before I come to the specifics, I want to highlight the broader sweep of the action that we are taking. The recent age equality review by Sir Ian Carruthers and Jan Ormondroyd will help us to make further inroads. It contains many of the sentiments expressed in the Age Concern and Help the Aged report published yesterday. It has also been commended by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which produced a briefing for today's debate, and which has welcomed the fact that its recommendation of a 2012 deadline for implementation of the ban has been taken up by the Government. It is good to know that the commission is powerfully on the side of the Government in this case. I hope that it is not among the organisations that the Opposition threaten to close if they ever return to power.

The age equality review recognises that the national health service has made progress on reducing age discrimination and provides sensible ideas on how to move things forward. We are consulting on the best way to put those recommendations into practice. One of the important messages coming out of the review was that reducing discrimination first and foremost means improving the quality of the existing services. If we can create the preventive, person-centred NHS described in Lord Darzi's report, "High quality care for all", and more recently in another report that hon. Members have failed to refer to in the debate, "From good to great", which is the new five year plan for the NHS, we shall automatically remove many of the problems that hon. Members have spoken about today.

Specific aspects of treatment and care for older people have been a problem in the past, but we have taken measures to address them. The main engine of change is the 2001 national service framework for older people, a 10-year programme to improve access to screening, treatments and other services. I am delighted to say, as others have not, that the framework has led to significant increases in the number of hip replacements and cataract operations, and a more than doubling in breast screenings for the over-65s, for instance. The next steps for the framework will be to address shortcomings in audiology and to improve the commissioning of services in connection with falls, fractures and osteoporosis.

Alongside the framework, many other Government programmes are directly or indirectly improving the quality of care for older people. No mention has been made this afternoon, for example, of the dignity champions campaign. We have 11,000 dignity champions in every part of our health and social care system, from front-line care workers to chief executives of primary care trusts and local authorities, making sure that older people are treated with respect and dignity. There is a drive to abolish mixed-sex accommodation, which is a particular concern for older patients. All hospitals must abolish mixed-sex wards next year unless they are clinically necessary, or face a financial penalty. That is another important milestone for the Government.

As hon. Members said—this is something that has been mentioned—we introduced the national dementia strategy, which I was proud to launch earlier this year. It will deliver real change in the quality and scope of services for people—mainly older people, as we know—who are affected by dementia. "Living well with dementia" is the title of the strategy, and it includes new measures for diagnosis so that we can get earlier intervention and

[Phil Hope]

treatment for older people and support them at the outset. New ideas such as memory clinics are being developed around best practice, better services and care.

The issue that Members have particularly highlighted is dementia research, which is one of 17 key objectives in the national dementia strategy. I opened and launched a national summit on dementia research in July. It was not then but in November that I announced the creation of a ministerial group on dementia research. I am putting the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam right on the date on which I made the announcement in Harrogate. It is my intention that the first meeting of the group will be held on 24 February. I hope that that specifically answers his question. He has a habit in debates like this of getting information out of me on specifics, and I am always delighted, if I can, to take the opportunity to give him such information.

Spending on dementia research is the key issue that the group will look at. The hon. Gentleman read out the group's terms of reference—what it is all about. We know that by next year there will be a £1 billion ring-fenced budget for research on health services in this country. The question is how much of it will be allocated to dementia. This is not about Ministers saying, "This amount of money will be put in." It is about independent clinicians looking at the bids coming in from the various sectors that seek research funds. Part of the problem that we have had is that the dementia researchers have not been putting in quality bids to win cash from the large pot of money, which has been growing year on year, that we spend on research in this country.

My concern is that the Dementias and Neurodegenerative Diseases Research Network, or DeNDRoN, is fully equipped and supported to improve the quality of its bids and to win more of the resource for dementia research, whether on analysis of the causes of dementia—we are a long way from finding a cure—on the care of people with dementia, on how people are treated using dementia drugs and so on. There is a great deal of work to be done. Dementia is where cancer was 20 years ago in terms of there being a talented group of individuals in research who are coming up with good ideas. The work that the third sector does in raising money and resources in its own way, international collaboration and co-ordination are all things that need to be driven forward, which is why I created a ministerial group to do just that, and to ensure that we raise our game on dementia research.

Mr. Burstow: One thing that was not clear from the written answer I received was whether there will be direct involvement at a ministerial level by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Phil Hope: I am happy to take suggestions of any kind about how we make the group work well. I want to ensure that it covers the broadest aspects around dementia research and involves all the key players such as researchers in the public sector and the private sector, if that be the case, and advice from the business community—frankly, wherever and whenever we can do the work that we need to do. We need to make the group manageable, so we must think about its membership. I have come up with a list of people. In practice, I am sure that we can engage many of the people out there, not just in this country but abroad as well.

Mr. Burstow: Perhaps I sat down prematurely. The point I am making is that that Department has an overall brief in respect of science and technology. Therefore, having ministerial input from it is rather important.

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I shall certainly liaise with ministerial colleagues. However, it will be my group. I will run it and ensure that it works well.

Another key aspect and plank of Government policy that hon. Members failed to mention is the end-of-life care strategy. It is worth mentioning in the tour d'horizon—the line of work that we are carrying out—as something that the Government are taking forward. The strategy is improving how older people are treated at the end of their lives, and deals with how and where they die. In addition, we are undertaking vital work in social care as well as health care.

The putting people first programme provides £500 million of extra resources to local councils. It is ring-fenced and helps them to build more personalised care services, not least for older people. In the partnerships for older people project, health and social services have joined charities and community groups to take action to reduce the incidence of people falling in their own homes, and to increase older people's independence.

Of course, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Eddisbury, we have introduced radical proposals for social care which involve creating a national care service for the future. Despite all the arguments made in the House on Monday on Second Reading of the Personal Care at Home Bill, both Opposition parties decided not to oppose it and, I am delighted to say, it has gone to Committee. Clearly, this Government have touched on something, and we are leading the way and ensuring that those people with the greatest needs—mainly older people living in their own homes—are supported so that they can continue to live in their own homes independently, with choice and control over their life.

Another strategy that the Opposition parties failed to give the credit it deserved is the carers strategy. We will not be bringing it forward because it is a 10-year strategy—it is defined by that length of time. We have a three to five year delivery programme in place to make it a reality. It includes extra cash—not least for respite care—for local authorities, primary care trusts and groups in the community.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury raised a particular issue concerning carer's allowance. I was intrigued by his query, because, as we know, carer's allowance is an income replacement benefit. Someone cannot be paid two benefits at the same time, which is why carer's allowance comes to an end when somebody receives a pension. The pension is paid, and there are premiums on top of that—the carers premium—for pensioners in particular circumstances.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Will the Minister give way?

Phil Hope: I will be intrigued if the hon. Gentleman is about to tell me that his party will do something different with the carer's allowance from what is occurring at present. I am all ears.

Mr. O'Brien: As the Minister seeks to challenge me, I was drawing an analogy to show where a great deal of age discrimination is institutionalised within the process. I did not make any of the allusions that he spoke about. It is well known that carer's allowance is an income replacement benefit, although it is often perceived very differently by those who are in receipt of it. That is one of the challenges and issues that he and, indeed, all of us face.

On the subject of respite care, the Princess Royal Trust for Carers has come up with the shocking finding that, of the £50 million out of the £150 million allocated under the Government's strategy to cover respite care—we would hope planned care as much as emergency respite care—£40 million has gone missing, yet the only response so far from Ministers is that it is up to all MPs to harry their local trust. That is obviously an inadequate answer, and I hope that the Minister can tell us where the £40 million has gone.

Phil Hope: So no change on carer's allowance. When parliamentary representatives from the Opposition ask me questions, it implies that they are going to do something, but clearly not in this case.

On respite care spend, the hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the question raised by many carers organisations: is the money that we have allocated to the non-ring-fenced devolved budget being spent? The Liberal Democrats have fought very hard for that in their localist agenda, yet they press me hard in the national setting on why it is not being spent locally. However, to point out that contradiction, I would need to repeat something that I have already said in many debates in the past. There is an obvious contradiction in the Liberal Democrat position.

In fact, I have met the Princess Royal Trust for Carers and others from the carer's allowance unit to discuss this particular concern, to see whether we can do more to monitor the work that is being done on the spend of the resource, to find out where there may not be sufficient allocation, as they would see it, and to see what more strategic health authorities, for example, might do with the PCTs in their area to ensure that the respite care that is needed is properly commissioned through the new guidance that we are issuing to PCTs on how to commission services for carers, and to see that that happens in practice.

Mr. Burstow: That is all very well. In previous debates on this issue I have mentioned the need for transparency to the Minister. If we are to have local accountability for decisions made by local primary care trusts about the spending of this money, we need transparency locally. However, that is missing, which is why we have not been able to hold PCTs to account locally. Surely the Minister can help with transparency.

Phil Hope: Of course, transparency is an essential part of how a good national health service will work locally—being accountable to local people. Many things have been put in place to ensure that commissioners are given guidance on how to carry out good commissioning for services for carers, including respite care. Those local groups can take that guidance to their PCTs and discuss it with them and ensure that the local PCT is commissioning to the best quality practice that we can make available. A number of steps are in place. I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurances he requires, so that the Liberal Democrat policy is as consistent as we all would like it to be.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned malnutrition. He is right. We established a working group that produced a report earlier this year. We are preparing our response to that—he will just have to wait a little longer until we can make clear how we wish to take matters forward. I agree that practical steps can happen now to deal with issues relating to malnutrition. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a couple of good examples—red trays, and so on. I have visited hospitals where picture menus are used. Asking people to look at a picture of food rather than a description of it on a menu is a practical way of getting them to choose the food they really want. When the food arrives, it matches the picture. The cooks have to ensure that it actually matches the picture that is chosen, which raises the quality of the food provided.

There are many other aspects of the dignity campaign, including dignity champions.

Mr. Burstow *rose—*

Phil Hope: I give way to the hon. Gentleman. I am giving way a lot, given the time available to me, and I have more to say on the issues he has raised.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful for the Minister's time and, in the spirit of Christmas, for his generosity.

What will the future be of the board that was set up to write the report on malnutrition to which he is considering a response? Writing a report is one thing, but there is a need to see its recommendations implemented. Will that board be in place afterwards?

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait just a little longer. I am generous in giving him answers in these debates, but on this occasion he will have to wait for my analysis of the recommendations regarding what needs to happen and how that might be pursued, so that action happens on the ground. It is not a question of our not knowing what to do; what matters is making things happen on the ground, and that is what I am bending my mind to as I take my considerations forward.

The hon. Members for Leeds, North-West and for Eddisbury mentioned cancer treatment. There is more to do here. I am pleased to say that cancer death rates across all age groups have declined over the last decade, although the decline among older people has been much less significant than for other ages, as hon. Members have mentioned in detail. That is why we have established a national cancer equality initiative to tackle all inequalities in cancer care, including improving the treatment and services offered to older people. Early next year, there will be a new practical guide on reducing inequality, including detailed analysis from the national cancer intelligence network of data by cancer type, age and geography, so we can show where our efforts need to be focused in future. We are also looking at pilots to improve the way that older people are assessed for cancer treatment, to ensure that that is always done on the basis of clinical safety and effectiveness and never on the basis of age alone.

Other questions were raised about cancer screening. Our screening programmes are well respected internationally, with high-quality services and high levels

[Phil Hope]

of coverage. It is vital that we base all our screening programmes on the best international evidence. We must weigh up the effectiveness of screening certain age groups against the harm that may be caused—the possibility of false positives and false negatives—and the stress and anxiety that screening can lead to. It is not for Ministers to make any decision on the age range for screening; it is, rightly, a decision for the clinical experts. As the age equality review recommended, we will commission a programme of research into the upper age limits on breast screening.

I want to put hon. Members right on something that has been mentioned today. We are now extending our routine screening programmes for breast cancer to include women aged up to 73, and extending the programme for bowel cancer for men and women to those aged up to 75. It is important to get those facts on the record. I remind hon. Members that people beyond those age ranges can still self-refer to these screening programmes, and I strongly encourage them to do so if they have a history of cancer in the family.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam began with mental health, and that is where I should like to conclude. I am grateful to hon. Members for mentioning that we have launched "New Horizons", our new national strategy for mental health. However, before I get into that, I should like to say something about the national operating framework, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

I am at a loss to know what the hon. Gentleman is referring to that suggests there has been some kind of change. Perhaps he and I can correspond on this issue afterwards. Mental health is explicitly mentioned a number of times in the national operating framework, and is specifically mentioned in "New Horizons". In the framework we highlight the importance of intervening earlier in mental health problems so that we get better outcomes and better value for money. There are five explicit references to mental health in "New Horizons", although I will not read them out, and two explicit references to dementia. The whole of the "New Horizons" strategy is a lifespan approach. I do not think there has been a change of the kind the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Perhaps afterwards, through correspondence, we can confirm what I know to be true: that we have not changed the priorities in the way he suggested.

Mr. Burstow: I was trying to clarify whether mental health has become a "must do" in the operating framework. I understand that it has tiers, and that there are some things that are nice to do but which are not mandatory for local NHS organisations to deliver on. Has mental health been elevated to a "must do"?

Phil Hope: That is a different question from the one the hon. Gentleman raised in the debate. I thought he asked whether it had been downgraded in some way—*[Interruption.]* I understand now. With that in mind mental health services and the operating framework are not where they were before, with vital signs listed and five references made. We have moved on from the 10-year mental health service framework, which is now over—this is its last year—to "New Horizons", which went out to consultation and has now been published. That supersedes the old national service framework for mental health and will tackle the historic differences which hon. Members were right to highlight, in the way some older people are treated compared with working-age adults.

The new strategy will build on firm foundations. Spending is up by £2 billion over the past decade. We have two thirds more psychiatrists, a fifth more psychiatric nurses and more than 700 new community mental health teams, giving us a firm foundation and meaning that we can help people of all ages to access the services they are going to need.

For the avoidance of doubt, I have brought a copy of "New Horizons" with me. I shall mention annexe A particularly for the benefit of the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West, whom I do not think has read the detail. Annexe A is entitled,

"Characteristics or Descriptors of Non-discriminatory Services for Older People",

and that is mentioned in the main body of the text, which also covers primary care, mental health services, physical health problems, issues to do with research, and so on. It specifically refers to

"community mental health teams",

which I think the hon. Gentleman mentioned,

"Crisis Resolution and Home Treatment services, assertive outreach services, Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) and psychological services",

and so on. All older people should have the same access to these services that we have been building up over the past few years. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman the assurances that he and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam want about older people, who feature large in the strategy and are an important part of the future of mental health services. It is not only about mental health services; it is also about preventing mental ill health in the first place, through a cross-government strategy.

Let me provide some specifics. I will be doing a lot of work over the next few years, chairing a new ministerial advisory group on mental health inequalities to lead this agenda. We will work with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and other professional bodies to help providers re-design these services and tackle some of the cultural issues that mean that older people sometimes lose out. Training programmes for general practitioners and practice nurses, for example, will be developed, helping them become more sensitive to signs of depression among older people. This may also mean longer consultations by GPs, so they have more time to check on an older person's mental well-being and on the physical health reason about which they may have attended the surgery in the first place; and strengthening the availability of services for older people living in residential care homes, as was mentioned earlier, where depression issues can be strong.

For clarification, the 18-week wait to which reference was made applies to consultant-led mental health services, so there is an element of this in the present system. I believe that there are signs that mental health services are changing for the better. We have seen some great examples of GPs, therapists, social workers and care providers working together to provide the integrated personal support that we need.

I am delighted that this debate on the last day before the House rises for the Christmas recess has provided an opportunity to air the matter of support for older

people and of tackling age discrimination in health care. It has given me the rare opportunity to spell out at length the Government's high and strong track record on such matters, which is all about quality and consistency. Age discrimination, like any form of discrimination, is unacceptable. We have taken some important steps to remove it from health and social care, but there is of course more to do. I look forward in the months and years ahead to addressing the many issues that I have set out today as we move closer to what everyone supports—a full ban on age discrimination across all services.

3.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

Teesside Steel Industry

4 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding over this important debate, Mr. Cook. Had you not been presiding, I am sure you would have joined in the debate, as I know that this subject is close to your heart.

First, I thank Mr. Speaker for granting me this debate on what is an important subject for my area—steel is the lifeblood of our economy. Nearly a fortnight ago, Teesside was rocked by the disastrous news about the mothballing of the integrated iron and steel plants of Redcar and Lackenby. That news has destroyed the festive spirit of thousands of families across Teesside. The plants are in constituency of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird), who is taking a lead on this matter and has been fighting hard. However, many of the job losses are in my constituency.

I was once one of the many thousands of people who worked at that plant. As a young graduate engineer, I worked on bringing the Redcar blast furnace—the biggest blast furnace in western Europe—online in 1978-79. I worked on that furnace for eight months, and many years later I remember my many trials and experiences with it. Therefore, I have a deep, emotional attachment to this matter.

I shall talk generally about the steel industry on Teesside, including the importance of research and development. Then I shall say a few words about the steel industry in my own constituency, in particular the Skinningrove works. Then I shall raise the big issue that I mentioned earlier—the mothballing of the integrated plants in Redcar and Lackenby.

The importance of the manufacturing industry for our economy has been underestimated. We cannot survive as a nation on an economy that seems to range from pizza parlours to DVDs or sportswear retail warehousing. Manufacturing accounted for more than 20 per cent. of the economy in 1997 when Labour came to power and criticised the country for having too narrow an industrial base. However, by 2007, that share had declined to 12.4 per cent. Why is manufacturing important? Quite simply, it acts as a multiplier across all boundaries of the economy. It encourages the development of human skills, and the development of an infrastructure to support those skills. It also encourages research and development and the spread of innovation.

I will say a few words about steelmaking on Teesside. Steelmaking has been central to our economy since the mid-Victorian age, and has evolved over the decades to the position that it is now in. The main works line the River Tees and the core of those works is found in the Teesside Cast Products iron and steelmaking complex, whose mothballing has been announced.

At Grangetown, we have a fully functioning and impressive steel technology centre. That centre has an international reputation with an outstanding pilot plan, and many brilliant metallurgists, engineers, technologists and scientists work there. I must declare an interest, as I am a former employee of the research centre, and I had 14 happy years working there. Some of the work that I undertook at the Teesside technology centre was connected with the completion of what was then the British Steel Redcar works, and the commissioning of

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

the new blast furnace. At that time, the furnace was considered the biggest in the UK; I seem to recall that it was the biggest in Europe.

The furnace in Redcar was a great British achievement. It was to make iron for feeding to the Lackenby basic oxygen steel plant, and the associated continuous casting plant. Both were then state-of-the-art steelmaking and processing plants and, due to regular upgrading, they are still world-class plants today. They deserve more than merely being consigned to the scrap heap of past manufacturing glories, left to be of interest only to the industrial archaeologists of the future.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): It is an honour to be here with you today, Mr. Cook, and I congratulate my hon. Friend and praise him for the great work that he and other Teesside MPs have done on this issue.

The reality is that we need to keep this plant going. If we are ever to deliver the low-carbon economy that we have promised for the north-east, and develop things such as underground gasification of coal, carbon capture and storage, and sequestration of CO_2, we need to develop skills, not lose them. We should not consign them to history as has happened to so much of our industry in the north.

Dr. Kumar: I agree with every word and thank my hon. Friend for his support. He must have read the rest of my speech, as he is way ahead. I concur with the tenor of everything he said.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I must declare an interest because members of my family work at Corus on Teesside. The Copenhagen summit is taking place as we speak, and a low-carbon future for the world is being discussed. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is no better place than Teesside, with the skills, industrial heritage and facilities that it has available, to lead the world in that? Is this news not a bitter blow that must be overcome so that we can use that fantastic potential on Teesside?

Dr. Kumar: I agree with every word that the hon. Gentleman has said. I hope he is saying that we have to keep the works open. If he is, I am wholeheartedly with him all the way. The sentiments he expresses are similar to those expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson).

In my constituency, we have the world-class Skinningrove rolling mills, which until now have concentrated on small sections for the construction machinery sector. They have recently moved into supplying sections for the wind farm industry, which is seen as a sector where exponential growth can be expected. The mills have a vigorous and dynamic management and a committed work force who want the plant to grow and prosper.

I have helped the mills over recent months by brokering an offer from the local authority, Redcar and Cleveland borough council, for business rate relief. That offer is substantial, and I hope the Minister will join me in praising the dynamic management and the work force of Skinningrove works for their hard work and commitment.

I come to the subject of Teesside Cast Products and the disastrous news about the mothballing of the integrated iron and steel plants of Redcar and Lackenby. There is also the sad news that 1,700 steelworkers might be made unemployed. Furthermore, it is estimated that 8,000 people down the supply chain will lose their livelihoods.

The autonomous complex within Corus called Teesside Cast Products was once seen as the future of steelmaking—not just in the north-east, but in the whole country. The future of Teesside Cast Products was secured by a deal with a consortium that agreed to purchase almost 80 per cent. of the plant's output until 2014. That consortium included steel traders from Korea, Mexico and Italy. However, when the demand for steel across the world dried up, the partners, led by the Italians, tore up the agreement and announced that they would not buy any more steel.

I place on the record my great praise for all the efforts made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar to reach commercial solutions with the consortium to preserve production at Teesside Cast Products. In fact, she went to Italy to try to persuade the Italians to come back to the table. She displayed great courage.

On Teesside, all is not lost. After all, the Teesside Cast Products plant has not been closed completely and, according to Corus, will be kept in a state of total readiness for any possible restart. A full maintenance team will be kept in employment purely for such an eventuality. I need to stress the fact that bringing a blast furnace back online can be done. It was recently done at Port Talbot, after a year's shutdown. It was also done at the associated Corus plant at IJmuiden in the Netherlands.

I recognise that the Government have said that they are prepared to help Corus on Teesside, but that seems to be limited to the same recipe of cash for training and retraining. That support is important and helps those displaced by the Corus announcement to find other employment in the local labour market. Positive action in finding other industrial uses for the Redcar and Lackenby site is also welcome. That could be one of the new generation of carbon capture power stations recently given the go-ahead by Government, or used for other low-carbon applications. However, I still believe that that is not enough.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I am delighted that my hon. Friend has secured the debate; I am only sad that it lasts just 30 minutes. References have been made, and he is now making them, to the amounts of money that we require to ensure that we keep steel making on the Tees. Reference has also been made to the European globalisation adjustment fund, which we could tap into. That is a seriously large sum of money. In his opinion, will that be the next step that we take to ensure that we retain and maintain steel making on the Tees?

Dr. Kumar: I thank my hon. Friend for being here and supporting me. I agree with her on the globalisation adjustment fund. That is one of the questions that I intend to raise with the Minister.

We need to keep the plant alive and making a contribution to the regional and national economy, both as we go into the economic upturn in the new year and in the coming years. I feel strongly that there is a 10 per cent. chance of keeping the Redcar steel complex

open and we must do everything possible to keep it open. Also, to realise the vision originally held for Teesside Cast Products of a high-quality producer of bulk steel for the world re-rolling market, we must urgently search for new partners. The responsibility for that lies with Corus and the Government.

There are still, I believe, windows of opportunity. I am told that the Pacific rim, for example, has hardly been affected by the downturn in terms of infrastructure projects. Granted, new steel-making capacity will be coming on stream in future years in that region, but that will take a long time to bed in. Teesside is an existing world-class iron and steel-making complex and its products are tried and tested.

While my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar has taken the lead with Corus, I have made every effort and used all my links with Tata to find possible solutions. In the many conversations that I have had with the members of the Tata board, it has been clear that they feel that the Government have not done enough to help the industry; they had lost confidence in the Government's support for steel.

I welcome the announcement that the Government allocated £60 million in a response package, but the Minister will know that there has been some concern in the media and on Teesside about that announcement. I shall therefore ask some important questions and seek reassurances. How much of that cash will come from existing budgets within his Department and the regional development agency, One NorthEast, and is that cash guaranteed for Teesside?

Will the Minister reassure me that the cash allocated to help apprentices is safe, and will he name the agency that is to handle that work? Will the cash from the strategic investment fund, boosting efforts to build a low-carbon economy in the region, come to Teesside, given that previous commitments to the new and renewable energies cluster were for the whole north-east? Are those low-carbon funds as yet unallocated? Will the cash for biotechnology initiatives be used to offer new employment openings for displaced process workers affected by the Corus mothballing?

Companies such as Progressive Energy, bidding to build an 850 MW power station on a site nearby, have suggested that their work could keep the Corus plant open by capturing carbon dioxide from Corus operations, thereby allowing Corus to bid for carbon credits. Will the Government, through the Department of Energy and Climate Change, examine that possibility, along with similar opportunities?

Will the Government apply for financial assistance under the European globalisation adjustment fund, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor)? That could be used to lessen the blow to individuals by allowing cash from the fund to supplement the training packages being devised. Will the Minister accept the Government's role in providing match funding for that if it is required?

Crucially, even at this late stage, I urge my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to pick up the phone and call Ratan Tata, chairman of the Tata Group, and Mr. Muthuraman, former managing director of Tata Steel who is now the vice-chair of the Tata board, to invite them, along with Corus chief executive Kirby Adams, to an urgent steel summit in No. 10 Downing street with the trade unions.

I urge the Prime Minister to approach that meeting as he did the meetings with the bankers, to ask Mr. Tata what the Government can do to keep the plant open, and to do it for the sake of all the people on Teesside whose livelihoods are threatened. I can tell the Minister that I have spoken to the representatives of the Tata board and they are willing to come to No. 10 Downing street to discuss with the Prime Minister a rescue package to keep the Redcar steel complex open.

Steel and Teesside are inseparable in the consciousness of my constituents. In more practical terms, the livelihoods of tens of thousands of Teessiders and their families depend on steel. I hope that the Labour Government, whom I have supported passionately on every occasion since 1997, will join me and give further support to the ideas that I have suggested today, because the opportunity exists. I want our Prime Minister and his Ministers to take that opportunity. Do not let us down at this time.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr. Pat McFadden): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland (Dr. Kumar) on securing this debate. I know how much the steel industry means to him personally—as he said, he worked for many years in the steel industry at Teesside—and to his constituents. It is in his blood, as it is in theirs.

I note the presence here today of other Members from the area, including my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson), for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) and for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird)—and you, Mr. Cook. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland said, as a constituency MP you too have a great interest in the subject.

If anyone doubted the strength of feeling in the local community about what is happening at the Teesside plant, they need only to have seen the demonstration of support at Middlesbrough's Riverside football ground over the weekend. I understand that. I understand the pain caused by the loss of a steelworks in a local community, as steel runs through my constituency too. It is now 30 years since the Bilston steelworks closed, but local people remember it as though it was yesterday. It has taken a long, long time for the area to recover.

The current recession has hit the steel industry hard. Three specific factors serve as the backdrop for Corus's decision to mothball the Teesside plant. The first is a fall in demand. This year, steel production at Corus is expected to be some 33 per cent. down on 2008, and only about 60 per cent. of capacity. Teesside Cast Products—TCP—makes steel for export, but if we compare the first nine months of 2008 with the same period in 2009, we see that steel demand throughout Europe has fallen by 40 per cent. The potential for the company to trade its way out of its difficulties in this country is severely limited.

The second factor is a fall in price. Between July 2008, when prices peaked at just over $1,000 per tonne, and December 2009 the price per tonne of the kind of steel produced at Teesside has fallen by nearly 60 per cent. That has left Corus struggling to cope with the twin problems of a fall in demand for its product and a fall in price. Not surprisingly, that has put severe pressure

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on Corus's finances and the economics of its steelmaking operations, hence the announcement of large-scale job losses twice this year, even before the Teesside announcement a couple of weeks ago.

Greg Clark: Given the time that is available, I do not think that Teesside wants an explanation of the problems faced by Corus; it wants to know why the Government have failed to act in bringing together the right sort of people in a summit to save Corus. Will the Minister move on to that?

Mr. McFadden: If the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about failure, I simply turn to the Opposition's continued opposition to the fiscal stimulus that has boosted demand for steel products. I am not going to take any lessons on inaction from a party that, throughout the recession, has consistently called on us to cut spending. That would have hurt steelmaking even more than the difficulties I have outlined.

Ms Dari Taylor: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. McFadden: I will give way, but I am keen to answer some of the questions posed during the debate.

Ms Taylor: It is important for us to hear from the Minister. The press say that the Government are apparently blocking attempts by the regional development agencies to access funds, and are failing to match the support given by other European countries to their core manufacturing industries. We need to know this afternoon whether there is any truth or credibility in that.

Mr. McFadden: I assure my hon. Friend that we are not in the business of blocking anything that might be constructive for the future of the Teesside plant or the area. In contrast, our response has been both swift and significant in scale.

The third reason for Corus's decision, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland referred, is specific to the Teesside plant: the collapse of the off-take agreement to buy the steel produced there. The agreement was reached in December 2004. Under it, 78 per cent. of the slab steel produced at Teesside was to be sold at cost over a 10-year period to a consortium of four foreign steel companies. Earlier this year, that agreement broke down, in part because the world market cost of steel had fallen below the cost of producing steel at Teesside; the off-takers walked away from the agreement.

I spoke at the time to Corus chief executive Kirby Adams and to Antonio Marcegaglia of Marcegaglia steel, the lead partner in the consortium, to encourage them to resurrect the off-take agreement. I asked the two sides to meet again to try to resurrect the agreement, and stressed how critical it was to the future of the plant and to the thousands of people of Teesside who depended for their livelihoods on the continued operation of the plant—the reason for the agreement. Members will know that that meeting took place in July, but no agreement was reached.

Against a background of falling demand and a depressed price, and with no partner for its product, the future for TCP looked bleak. Despite that, Corus tried to keep the plant alive, transferring internal work to it and securing some short-term export work. Eventually, however, the three factors that I mentioned earlier took their toll, and the decision to mothball the plant was announced.

Throughout, the Government did what we could to keep up demand for steel. We brought forward capital spending on construction, which accounts for about half the steel used in the UK. Without that investment, the UK construction industry would be flat on its back. We also committed £400 million to the car scrappage scheme to underpin the vital automotive sector, another very large user of steel. Again, I stress that those stimulus measures were opposed every step of the way by the Opposition. Had we taken their advice—if they had had their way—demand for steel would have been hurt even more than was dictated by the market conditions.

I set out the background in order to make it clear that Corus's decision of a couple weeks ago was not taken as a result of Government inaction. We went the extra mile to try to boost demand and to resurrect the off-take agreement upon which TCP depended. Corus has not asked for aid to keep the plant open, which in any case is not possible under state aid rules. The fact is that Corus cannot run the plant without customers and without demand for the product it makes.

Mr. Dav[illegible]son *rose—*

Mr. McFadden: I am keen to press on if my hon. Friend will forgive me.

As a result of Corus's decision, 1,700 people employed directly by the company will lose their jobs, as will a further 1,000 sub-contractors.

In the couple of minutes left to me, I want to move on to the questions about the support package that have been asked today. The Government have moved quickly. The Prime Minister and I have both spoken to the chief executive of Corus. The chief executive has stressed that the site is mothballed and that no decision has been taken to close it permanently. Of course, market conditions may change, a new partner may be found and steel could be produced again at the site. I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland that if we can help to bring that about, we will do so.

However, those possibilities will not come about easily, and it would be wrong of the Government to stand back and wait for that to happen. The people affected by this announcement need help now. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a £60 million package of support. My hon. Friend asked some questions about that funding. It includes £30 million of new money from the Government's strategic investment fund, and £30 million from One North East, the RDA, which is to be reprioritised from within its existing resources.

Much has been said about low carbon, rightly so, as it is critical to the future of manufacturing in the area. We will use the money to equip Teesside to become part of our low carbon manufacturing base. We know that low carbon is the future. If we are to succeed, we must have a national low carbon capability. It will include £6 million of support for research and development of bio-based materials, £3 million to undertake engineering design, and £20 million for infrastructure development. We will also support the critical Wilton chemicals cluster; we want to see it continue and prosper as part of the low carbon future.

The Government are committed to the people of the north-east, and wish to help them recover from this decision. I have seen what can happen when whole communities are left on their own. We will not let that happen in this case. Rarely can a Government have moved so fast and on such a scale in response to a closure, but the people of Teesside deserve it. They deserve our help, and we will stand by them in future.

Neuroblastoma (Monoclonal Antibody Therapy)

4.30 pm

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank Mr. Speaker for granting me this debate so quickly. Not many people know about this very nasty form of cancer, which affects a small number of children in this country each year. I welcome the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) to the Chamber as the Minister who will respond to this debate. We are very fortunate to have her here because she is renowned throughout the House for her compassion, genuineness and her ability to get things done behind the scenes. I will be asking her to employ all those qualities to solve a difficult problem and to give hope to a little boy called Zac.

Zac is a constituent of mine who suffers from a rare form of cancer called neuroblastoma. He is five years old and was diagnosed with stage 4 acute neuroblastoma in February this year. Doctors discovered a 10 cm tumour in his stomach, and smaller growths on his thigh and pelvis. Such news would have been devastating to any family, but it was made all the worse by the fact that Zac's three-year-old cousin Chelsea had been diagnosed with the same horrible cancer 18 months earlier, when she was just two years old.

Sadly, after more than two years of bravely battling the cancer, Chelsea passed away on 9 August 2009, just one month before her fourth birthday. The treatment that Chelsea received in the UK gave her a 20 to 30 per cent. chance of survival. Treatment in America would have given her a 70 per cent. chance of survival, but it would have cost her family a quarter of a million pounds.

Michelle Tomkins, Chelsea's aunt told me:

> "Chelsea passed away because we did not have enough time to raise the money to get her to a hospital in New York offering a treatment that gives a 70 per cent. chance of survival, whereas here in the United Kingdom, it is only 30 per cent. The UK could do no more for Chelsea and this was her only hope, but we struggled so much. I can't bear seeing them having to go through this all over again. A child's life should not have a price on it."

I want to emphasise two clear points that Mrs. Tomkins made. She said that the UK could do no more, and that a child's life should not have a price on it. In this day and age, such statements should never have to be said, but sadly both are true.

Neuroblastoma is a rare cancer of the sympathetic nervous system—a nerve network that carries messages from the brain throughout the body. It is usually found in young children, and it is the most common cancer among infants. The solid tumours, which take the form of a lump or mass, may begin in nerve tissues in the neck, chest, abdomen, pelvis, or, most commonly, in the adrenal gland. They may also spread to other areas of the body, including bone and bone marrow.

The disease affects about 100 children in the UK. Fewer than 30 cases are diagnosed each year, with the majority of cases affecting children aged one to four. Neuroblastoma is the second most common solid tumour in childhood, and makes up 8 per cent. of the total number of children's cancers. However, the odds on

[Mr. Peter Bone]

having two cases of neuroblastoma in the same family are one in 10 million, and sadly that has happened to Chelsea and Zac.

Detecting the cancer can be difficult. The first signs are that the child becomes tired and loses their appetite. The symptoms also depend on where the disease is in the body. For example, if the tumour is in the abdomen, the belly will swell. However, because many of the symptoms can be seen as symptoms of less serious illnesses, diagnosing it can come at a late stage when the tumour has spread to other parts of the body.

There are different ways of treating neuroblastoma, but prognosis is dependent on age, stage of disease, and the molecular biologic and cytogenetic characteristics of the tumour. Surgery is a way of curing the disease, but it is only possible if the tumour has not spread, and is not in a position of high risk. As the disease is hard to diagnose at an early stage, that is rarely a viable option. However, the next stage would be intensive chemotherapy, which can reduce the size of the tumour and prepare it for surgery, but that, too, can be dangerous to the child.

High-dose chemotherapy with stem cell rescue can also be given. If the neuroblastoma has spread to several parts of the body, or is high-risk with MYCN amplification, high-dose chemotherapy with stem cell rescue is used after the initial courses of chemotherapy. High doses of chemotherapy wipe out any remaining neuroblastoma cells, but they also wipe out the body's bone marrow, where blood cells are made. To prevent the problems that that causes, stem cells—blood cells at their earliest stages of development—are collected from the child through a drip, before the chemotherapy is given. The stem cells are then frozen and stored. After the chemotherapy, the stem cells are given back to the child through a drip. The stem cells make their way into the bone marrow, where they grow and develop into mature blood cells over a period of 14 to 21 days.

Imagine that treatment, Mr. Cook, for your own child. It would be bad enough for an adult, but for a toddler it must be almost unbearable. Radiotherapy is another avenue that sufferers can pursue, but it has high risks and can harm normal cells. Those options are bad enough for any child and any family, but they lead to a survival rate of only 20 to 30 per cent., which is simply not good enough.

Another treatment is available in America that can improve that sad statistic of 20 to 30 per cent. to a respectable 70 per cent.-plus survival rate. The treatment is called 3F8 monoclonal antibody therapy. Normally a person's immune system makes antibodies to attack germs such as bacteria or viruses, but unfortunately it will not attack neuroblastoma because the tumour is part of our own bodies. However, an antibody that attaches to neuroblastoma can be made in a laboratory, then given intravenously to a patient. That antibody will circulate in the bloodstream until it finds and attaches itself to a neuroblastoma cell, then the patient's own immune system will attack and kill that neuroblastoma cell.

On Thursday 10 December 2009, I tabled a parliamentary question asking the Secretary of State for Health

"if he will make it his policy that monoclonal antibody therapy is available to NHS patients diagnosed with neuroblastoma."

In response, the Under-Secretary of State for Health said:

"The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has not issued any guidance on monoclonal antibody therapy...In the absence of NICE guidance, it is a matter for local national health service organisations to decide whether to fund a particular drug or treatment. The NHS Constitution gives patients the right to expect local funding decisions on the availability of drugs and treatments to be made rationally following consideration of the available evidence."—[*Official Report*, 10 December 2009: Vol. 502, c. 551W.]

It is therefore quite clear that there is nothing to prevent the NHS from providing my constituent with monoclonal antibody therapy. In fact, the NHS constitution would lead my constituents to expect such treatment. It is also clear that this is an exceptional case. For one family to have suffered two cases of this dreadful killing cancer is more than unfortunate.

Little Chelsea's final wish to her mummy and daddy

"was for them to help other poorly children."

Recently, I met Chelsea's mother and I was amazed at her courage and fortitude after what has happened to her. This is what she said to me:

"If we help with making these children smile, our angel will be smiling too."

That is exactly what needs to be done. Little Zac needs this monoclonal antibody therapy.

I have spoken to Zac's consultant, Dr. Johan Visser, and he believes that the monoclonal antibody therapy is especially helpful to children who have responded well to the traditional treatment of surgery and chemotherapy. Six weeks ago, Zac had a very large tumour successfully removed and subsequently he has had more chemotherapy, to mop up any remaining cancerous cells. However, to give Zac the very best chance of a full recovery, he needs monoclonal antibody therapy in March or early April next year, so time is of the essence.

Michelle Tomkins, Zac's aunt, eloquently states:

"My cousin's family needs to raise this extortionate amount of money to stop another little child in their family dying."

A life, especially a child's life, should not have a price tag, but sadly £250,000 is needed—that sum needs to be raised to send Zac across to the United States to receive treatment. Zac's family have set up an appeal, which people can donate to online at www.zacsappeal.org. Zac's appeal has raised a fantastic £8,000. Among other things, the appeal has sold Zac wristbands and calendars, and even arranged a charity football game between two local teams. It has also received media attention, with the help of my excellent local newspaper, the Northamptonshire *Evening Telegraph*. Like my eight-year-old son, Zac is a Manchester United fan and he was the mascot for the match on 21 November 2009 between Manchester United and Everton. Nevertheless, after all these valiant efforts Zac's appeal is still short of £242,000, so it has raised only 3 per cent. of what is needed.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. There is another solution. This disease affects approximately 24 children a year in the United Kingdom, so treating it is not a huge cost to the taxpayer. There is even better news. The Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group, or CCLG, has announced a clinical trial using monoclonal antibody therapy. However, as it is a trial, all the children

need to have had the same therapy for the same period of time. Unfortunately, Zac misses this trial as he started his treatment six weeks too soon.

Zac is one of a handful of children who have missed this clinical trial who would have benefited from treatment with monoclonal antibody therapy. In future, all children who are diagnosed with neuroblastoma will go into such trials, but there is a small group of about half a dozen children who are not in the existing trial and who will not take part in future trials. They are the ones stuck in the middle.

The point or crux of this debate, and the reason why I am here today, is to get that treatment for a handful of children who need it, but who just miss out on the trial. I believe that those half a dozen or so children need to be treated here in our country and treated now. Dr. Visser has stated that he is happy to administer the treatment to Zac if funding is provided. The Government spend £100 billion on the NHS a year. Funding for those half a dozen or so children would be just a drop in the ocean.

I know that the Minister has close links with the Prime Minister and we all know of her compassion and that she can get things done. The biggest Christmas present that she could give to Zac and these other children is to go from this debate today to the Prime Minister and get the funding for them sorted out.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr. Cook.

Of course, I want to thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) for securing this extremely important debate. I also congratulate him on the manner in which he has conducted it. I have also had the opportunity to chat with him in his office and that has been incredibly helpful.

I am sure that all Members and all of us present today will sympathise with Zac and his family, and we appreciate how heartbreaking it must be for a parent to discover that his or her child has cancer. In my many years as a nurse, including my involvement with children's nursing, I have had what I suppose I would call the privilege of being with children when they have died, and also with their families.

It is incredibly difficult for a family to cope with a child who is very seriously ill. It has knock-on effects on that family and the extended family, because of the obvious stress that it causes and because of the energy that is taken out of mum and dad, and, indeed, out of siblings if there are any. So I fully understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from with this debate.

Thankfully, cancer in children is rare, with about 1,700 new cases being diagnosed in the UK in 2007. We estimate that about 2 per cent. of those cases were neuroblastoma cases. There have been remarkable improvements in the survival rates for most childhood malignancies in the past 30 years. Between 1970 and 2000, the overall five-year childhood cancer survival rate in Britain has increased from 28 per cent. to 77 per cent. and, in the case of neuroblastoma in the same period, the childhood cancer survival rate has increased from 19 to 59 per cent. I do not want my contribution to this debate to consist of stating lots of percentages. However, it is important that we put on record the progress that has been made in treating childhood cancer. Improving the care of children with cancer is one of our country's success stories and we need to thank the clinicians, researchers and other scientists for the fact that some of the best children's cancer services in the world are in the UK.

However, I am very aware that survival rates for children diagnosed with neuroblastoma are not as high as for some other cancers and, of course, even one child's death is too many. We are not complacent and we are determined to continue to improve survival rates for all childhood cancers. We are doing that by helping GPs to identify children who are most likely to have cancer and who therefore need an urgent assessment; by ensuring that children diagnosed with cancer, including neuroblastoma, receive treatment as quickly as possible, and by organising services to ensure optimal outcomes for children and improved experiences, so that a little one's journey through that clinical work, which the hon. Gentleman explained can be very difficult and painful, can be improved. We also need to improve our treatment process and research into children's cancer, which is essential, and we are doing that as quickly as possible.

I would like to say a few words on each of the issues. As with all cancers, the earlier that childhood cancer is diagnosed, the better the prognosis for the child. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, or NICE as we commonly refer to it in debates, published updated referral guidelines for suspected cancers in 2005. Those guidelines are aimed at helping primary care health professionals to identify those patients who are most likely to have cancer and who therefore require urgent assessment by specialists. The guidelines include a section on cancers in children and young people.

Also, as set out in the second annual report of the cancer reform strategy, promotion of early diagnosis for all cancers is a priority for 2010. We have pledged to all patients in England access within one week to tests that can confirm or exclude cancer, and we will start rolling that out over five years from 2011-12. Quicker access to diagnostic tests, alongside work on early detection, will save 10,000 lives a year. Through the national awareness and early diagnosis initiative, we have committed £6 million to help GPs diagnose cancer earlier and to make the public aware of the symptoms so that they get them checked out early.

However, the distinct needs of children and young people with cancer have been recognised increasingly over recent years, which is why we asked NICE to produce service guidance for the NHS on improving outcomes for children and young people with cancer. The guidance was published in August 2005 and is aimed at those responsible for planning, commissioning and organising services for children and young people with cancer.

The guidance recommends principal treatment centres for each cancer type, with associated referral pathways to centres that might be outside the patient's area of residence; access and support to clinical trials where the patient is eligible; care delivered by multi-disciplinary teams, including all relevant specialist staff, and care offered in age-appropriate facilities. The cancer reform strategy made a commitment to implement the guidance by the end of 2011.

[Ann Keen]

The hon. Gentleman highlighted that research into the disease has brought good news that will give children diagnosed with neuroblastoma the chance to receive monoclonal antibody treatment in this country as part of a European trial announced last week. I will say more about the research later, but it is with sadness that I learned that Zac will not meet the eligibility criteria for the trial.

The hon. Gentleman stated that Zac's consultant is happy to administer treatment in this country if funding is provided. As with other unlicensed drugs, it is down to clinicians to decide whether the drug is the best treatment for an individual patient and to clarify the potential risks with the patient. Because the drug is not licensed and the treatment has not been appraised by NICE, the primary care trust must take the decision on whether to fund the treatment. I have done my best to investigate what has been applied for in Zac's PCT. I am led to believe that no formal application has been made, so I urge that one be made. I will take a close interest in the decision.

Mr. Bone: I am grateful to the Minister for her serious and helpful response to the debate. I am sure that she is right that a formal application has not been made, as I do not think that the family realised that it was possible to do so. My only concern is that, if the treatment costs £250,000 and the local primary care trust must fund it, it will be a bit unfortunate. Not many children are affected by the disease. Could the cost not be spread out over the whole NHS?

Ann Keen: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I know that other such drugs, called orphan drugs, are considered by the strategic health authority for the area or nationally. I would have to take advice about whether that could happen in this particular case, but I do not believe that the dialogue on Zac and the other children affected will be finished during this debate; I would expect us to carry on discussing the cases concerned.

In the past week, the launch of a major new clinical trial into the use of immunotherapy to treat children with neuroblastoma was announced. Cancer Research UK is funding the research costs in this country of the Europe-wide trial. The Government will provide infrastructure support via our national cancer research network. I understand that the trial will run in all 20 childhood cancer clinical trial centres across the UK starting this month. For the first time, that form of immunotherapy will be available in the UK to eligible UK patients. We will continue our long tradition of research excellence in helping build on earlier trials and devise even better ways of using the therapy.

The hon. Gentleman said that Zac missed eligibility by some weeks. I urge the clinicians involved to reconsider. Trials are trials, and they must have criteria, but it became evident to me while researching my reply that it might be possible to look at the matter. It would be wrong to raise hope; I am just asking for clarification of when the trial will commence. Of course, because not every child with neuroblastoma will benefit from immunotherapy, eligibility criteria, as in all well-designed trials, must be precisely defined. There will be a careful and necessary selection process. The trial will offer new hope to the children who benefit—it could be as many as 40 a year—and their families.

Children who take part in the Cancer Research UK trial will join the many other children and adults involved in clinical trials of cancer treatments. It is a tribute to all those working in the NHS, the cancer charities and the commercial sector that the percentage of cancer patients who enter trials each year is higher in England than anywhere else in the world.

The existence of the National Cancer Research Network, which the Government set up in 2001 and continue to fund, has been key to that achievement. Each cancer service network receives funds for an integral cancer research network. The £18 million we put into the NCRN this year provides dedicated research nurses, data managers, medical staff sessions and other services such as radiology and pathology.

As we all recognise, the new international trial is an exciting development, and it is right that we should focus on it, but I also take note of the six other children whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned. At all times, we urge clinicians—as I urge them today—to apply to the PCT where the child lives for funding. If that has been done and an appeal process is in place, I urge the PCTs to consider it.

This is our last debate of the year. It is so important to Zac and his family and to the other children. I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I wish him and his family well this Christmas, as I know that his son is serving in Afghanistan. I wish him all the best during this distressing time.

Question put and agreed to.

4.58 pm

Sitting adjourned.